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THE ERAWAN WAR

Volume 1: The CIA Paramilitary Campaign in Laos, 1961-1969

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ASIA@WAR SERIES

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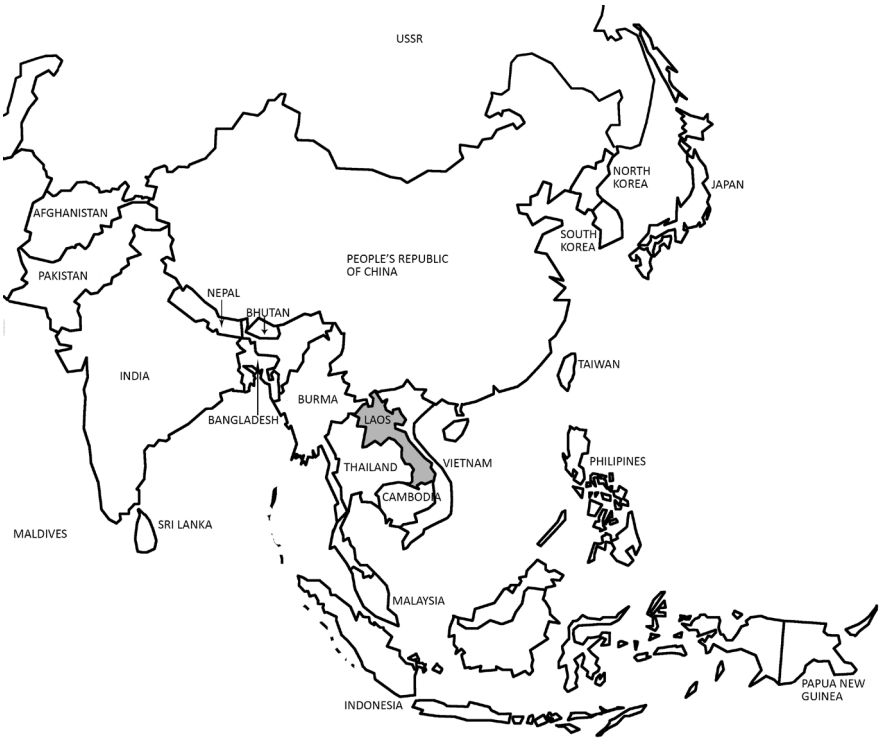

Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADC	*auto defense d'choc*, company-sized militia formations under the CIA irregular program
BG	*bataillon guerriers*, literally "warrior battalion". The redesignation of SGU battalions.
BPP	Border Patrol Police, a Thai police formation deployed in rural parts of the kingdom, especially the borders.
CASI	Continental Air Services, Inc.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
Dac Cong	Literally "special mission" in Vietnamese. The term for PAVN special operations units.
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAG	Forward Air Guide
FAR	*Forces Armées Royales*, or Royalist Armed Forces of Laos.
FG/E	Forces Guerrilla/East, the guerrilla zone covering the eastern part of MR 1. Headquartered at Luang Prabang.
FG/NW	Forces Guerrilla/Northwest, the guerrilla zone covering the northwestern part of MR 1. Headquartered at Nam Yu.
GM	*Groupement Mobile*, a regiment consisting of three to four battalions.
JLD	Joint Liaison Detachment, the cover designation for the CIA paramilitary base at Udorn.
LS	Lima Site, the name given to up-country airfields in Laos.
MR	Military Region
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
PARU	Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit.
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam).
PDJ	*Plaine des Jarres*, or Plain of Jars.
PS	Pakse Site, the name given to airfields in MR 4.
RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RTA	Royal Thai Army
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
RTG	Royal Thai Government
RTSF	Royal Thai Special Forces
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SOT	Special Operations Team
SR	Special Requirements, the cover designation for RTA artillery units posted in Laos.
STOL	Short take-off and Landing
TACAN	Tactical Navigation beacon
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USSF	U.S. Army Special Forces

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SETTING THE STAGE

In August 1960, a wiry airborne captain named Kong Le seized the Lao capital of Vientiane in a largely bloodless coup. A landlocked kingdom in mainland Southeast Asia, Laos had formed a critical Cold War buffer between communist China and North Vietnam on the one hand, and the pro-Western government in Thailand on the other. Prior to that August, the U.S. had been painstakingly building up the Royalist Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Royales*, or FAR – the Royalist military went through two name changes before settling on FAR in September 1961) so that it could defend the kingdom against leftist insurgents known as the Pathet Lao. The FAR, in fact, had been realising gains in the countryside; mirroring this, rightist politicians had come to dominate the National Assembly.

But in less than a day, Kong Le irrevocably upset that apple cart. Ranting against corruption and foreign interference, he declared himself head of a newly-minted Neutralist faction that quickly allied itself with the Pathet Lao. He invited Pathet Lao combatants into the capital, soon followed by military aid from the Soviet Union and North Vietnam.

For the administration of Dwight Eisenhower, this was something that Washington could not abide. Pouring in material and financial assistance to anti-communist Royalists assembling in the Lao panhandle, this allowed the FAR to march north in late November and expel the rebel paratroopers from Vientiane by early the following month.

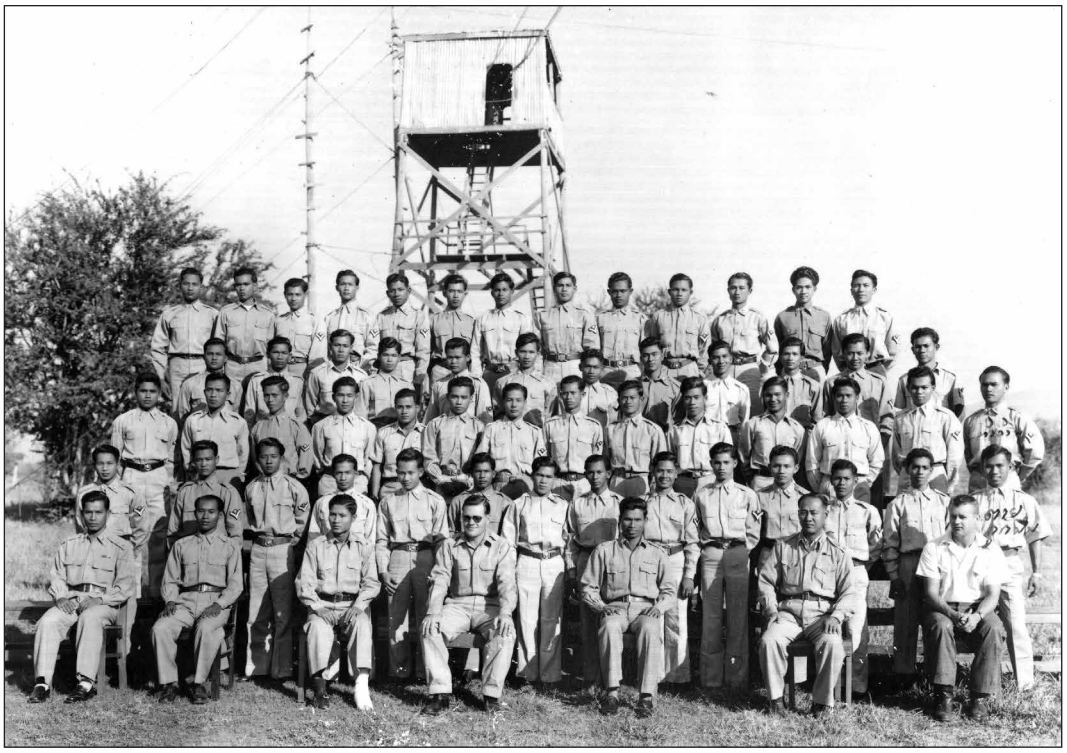
While deprived of the capital, Kong Le's men – with North Vietnamese artillery crews from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in tow – were hardly counted out. Managing an orderly withdrawal north along Route 13, they then veered east onto the strategic Plain of Jars (*Plaine des Jarres*, or PDJ) at year's end. FAR defenders on the plain promptly fled in a chaotic rout. Compounding matters, Royalist generals showed more interest in dividing the spoils in Vientiane than organising a proper counter-offensive. Kong Le, as a result, was able to consolidate his grip around the plain, while his Pathet Lao comrades cemented their control over Sam Neua and Phongsaly provinces.

Because the FAR was showing so little stomach for combat, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stepped into the fray. Helping them in these matters was Thailand, which was understandably concerned about communist encroachment and in late 1960 had already formed a covert military advisory group called the Thai Committee to Support Laos, better known by its Thai acronym Kaw Taw. Answering to the Royal Thai Army (RTA) chief of staff responsible for security policy toward Laos and Cambodia, Kaw Taw had initially set up a small office in Bangkok and a forward detachment in the Royalist stronghold of Savannakhet in southern Laos.

Prior to the retaking of Vientiane, in fact, Kaw Taw had offered sabotage training to 30 FAR recruits under Thai border police

auspices. Moreover, on one occasion they also dispatched Thai police commandos to mortar Neutralist positions in Vientiane. And once the FAR began its march on the capital in earnest, six Kaw Taw teams accompanied the advancing troops.

Despite such efforts by Kaw Taw, they could do little to steel the Lao. Virtually the only bright spot within the FAR was the performance of Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao, a member of the Hmong hilltribe who had organised a rear-guard action as the Royalists fled south off the plain. It would be Vang Pao, and his fellow Hmong tribesmen, who would come to form the backbone of the CIA's guerrilla army in Laos.



CIA advisor Bill Lair (front row, centre) with the stay-behind Thai cadre trained at Lopburi, 1952. They would later form the core of PARU. (Photo courtesy William Lair)

Gaining Momentum

In many ways, the story of the Hmong guerrillas began in Bangkok during the fall of 1950. Responding to the perceived threat from China, Washington threw its weight behind Thailand's anti-communist strongman, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram. Part of the U.S. response to the Chinese threat was to have the newly opened CIA station in Bangkok forge a stay-behind network of Thai partisans for use in the event of a Chinese invasion.

To create such a network, the CIA looked toward the Thai police, seen as more flexible and open to new roles than the heavily bureaucratic RTA. Assigned to work with the Thai police on the project was James William "Bill" Lair, 25, a geology graduate from Texas A&M University on his first overseas CIA assignment.

Arriving in Bangkok in March 1951, Lair was sent to the town of Lopburi. There, in a rustic military camp next to the RTA's Infantry Training Center, he helped establish an eight-week course in parachuting and unconventional warfare tactics open to select Thai from what came to be known as the Border Patrol Police (BPP).

By early 1953, the original raison d'être for Lair's stay-behind network – to operate in the wake of a Chinese invasion – was slowly dissipating. To be sure, the Chinese still continued hostile radio barrages against the Thai government. But that aside, Washington increasingly saw Chinese threats to Thailand as little more than harsh language. Still, Lair was reluctant to downscale the guerrilla capability forged over the preceding two years; rather than disbandment, he proposed reshaping the stay-behind force into an elite special operations unit.

To Lair's surprise the proposal got quick support in Bangkok and Washington, and that April he was authorised to transform the police guerrilla cadre into a commando outfit. In testimony to the close U.S.-Thai coordination in the effort, Lair was officially commissioned as a captain in the BPP; two other CIA advisors on the project were also commissioned as BPP officers.

As a core for the commando unit, Lair drew from the existing pool of Lopburi graduates. After 100 of the best were chosen, another 300 raw recruits were added. Instruction for these new members was conducted at the southern coastal town of Hua Hin. By 1957, the combined 400 were divided among into two rifles companies and one pathfinder company (commanded by Lair himself).

After several name changes, in 1958 these commandos were designated as the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU), a benign title that intentionally camouflaged their role as a CIA-directed covert warfare force. Among their early assignments: beginning in early 1960, the Pathfinder Company was dispatched on intelligence-gathering forays along the Lao border. They were still there in August when Kong Le staged his coup. Shortly thereafter, the PARU commander, Lieutenant Colonel Pranet Ritileuchai, drew on his men to form the Kaw Taw teams that advised the FAR massing in Savannakhet. From there, they escorted the Royalist column that advanced into Vientiane during December.

By the first week of January 1961, with the FAR displaying chronic incompetence, the U.S. embassy groped for paramilitary responses to the worsening crisis. At the time, Vang Pao had joined the exodus south from the PDJ. En route, he radioed the Royalist strongman in Vientiane, General Phoumi Nosavan, and pledged his intent to hold the line at the village of Ta Vieng.

By the following afternoon, word reached Bill Lair (who had moved to Vientiane to coordinate PARU support) of Vang Pao's contact with Phoumi. Lair had known the Hmong leader by reputation from reports accumulated by PARU border posts over the previous year. Recognising the potential for guerrilla operations, Lair beckoned Lieutenant Colonel Pranet and a five-man PARU team, then together drove out to Vientiane's Wattay airbase.

On the Wattay ramp were the first four H-34 choppers earmarked for Air America, the CIA proprietary airline. Loading into one of the helicopters, they followed the Mekong to Paksane, then veered north to Ta Vieng. Easing the H-34 down, they found a Hmong tribesman near the landing zone who agreed to guide Pranet and his police commandos to Vang Pao.

Two days later, Lair himself returned in an H-34 for a meeting with the Hmong officer. Over discussions, Vang Pao claimed he

Momentum officer Tom Fosmire with a PARU commando (right) and Hmong villager, 1961. (Author's collection)

could recruit 10,000 of his tribesmen into a guerrilla army. Already, in fact, an estimated 4,300 Hmong were massing at Ta Vieng.

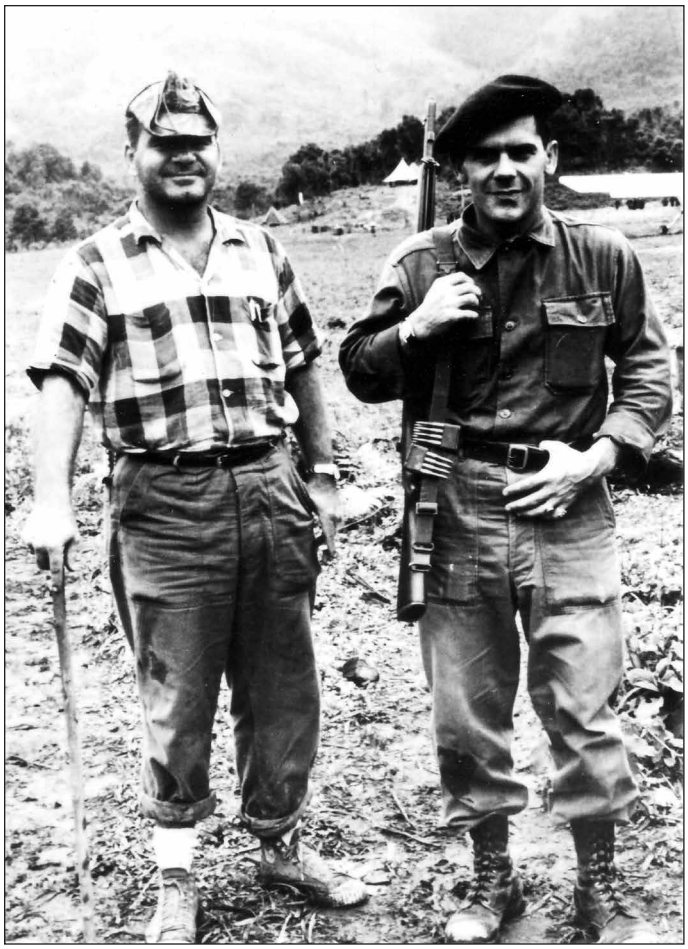
Unable to make an immediate commitment without approval from above, Lair departed late that afternoon. Arriving at Vientiane, he reported to the CIA's Vientiane Station chief, Gordon Jorgensen, and the head of the CIA's Far East Division, Desmond FitzGerald, who coincidentally was passing through Southeast Asia on a fact-finding tour. FitzGerald, long a supporter of PARU, requested a detailed memo on the subject; Lair obliged with an 18-page cable.

Before a response was forthcoming, communist forces on 13 January reached Ta Vieng, forcing the FAR, Hmong, and PARU to flee the village. Soon thereafter, Lair received approval from FitzGerald for Momentum, the project name for Hmong paramilitary guerrilla operations in northern Laos. Under Momentum, the U.S. Department of Defense was to channel funding through the CIA to arm the first 2,000 Hmong on an experimental basis. They would be organised into 100-man *auto defense d'choc* (ADC) companies, similar to an earlier militia network run by the FAR.

To coordinate the distribution of weapons, Lair again ventured north for a session with Vang Pao and Pranet. Already, he was told, the Hmong leader was gathering his hill tribesmen at seven concentrations around the PDJ. Since these pockets were widely dispersed, a central point had to be chosen where supplies could be parachuted. Further reasoning that the enemy would eventually spot the supply aircraft, Lair posited that the drop zone be situated where it would be difficult for the communists to reach and attack. To meet these requirements, Vang Pao suggested the village of Padong, tucked in the hills 17 kilometres off the southern end of the PDJ; the Hmong leader estimated it would take three days before the communists could overtake Padong.

Given this three-day window, Lair and Pranet sketched out a 72-hour crash training program. To begin, three 100-man loads would be parachuted to Padong, each with a full complement of arms and uniforms for an entire ADC company. The weapons – carbines, M1 Garands, Browning Automatic Rifles, 60mm mortars, and 3.5-inch rocket launchers – would be packed in light Cosmoline, ready for instant use.

Distributing the weapons and clothes, a PARU team would give instruction for rifles and crew-served weapons on the first day. On the second day, PARU would offer squad and platoon training in ambush techniques. The final day would be devoted to instruction



Early Momentum case officers Pat Landry and Tom Fosmire, spring 1961. (Photo courtesy Tom Fosmire)

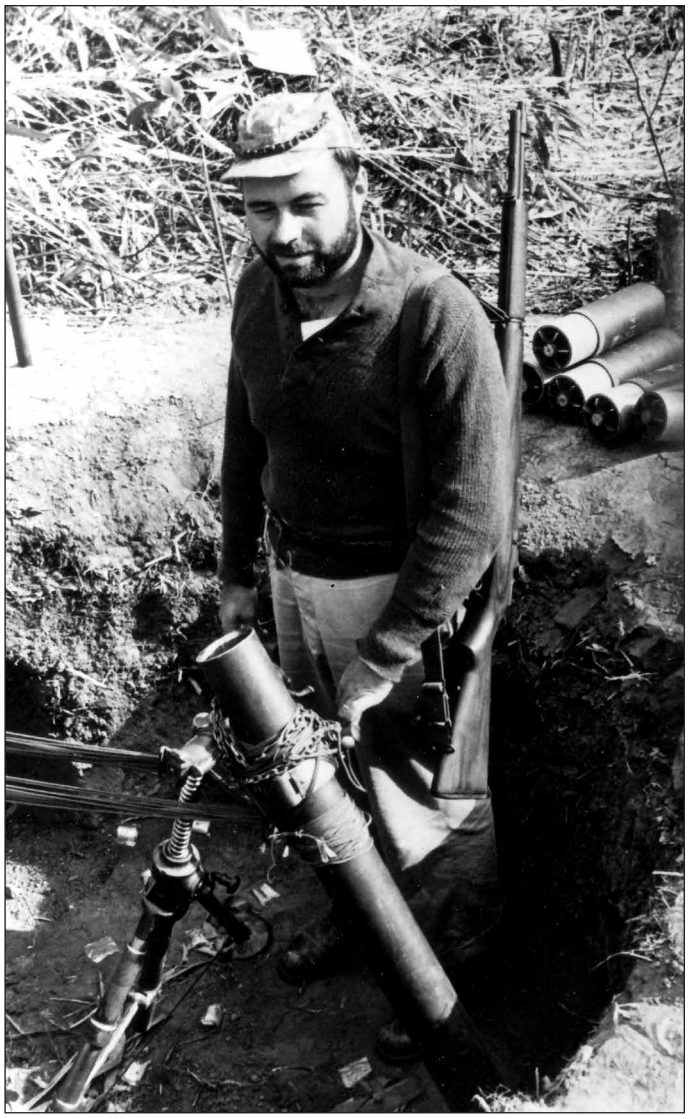
on booby traps, as well as squad, platoon, and company tactics in ambush situations.

Agreeing to this accelerated timetable, Vang Pao got on the radio and directed Hmong males to converge on Padong. The hill tribesmen responded overnight, with enough manpower on hand for the PARU team to begin training on 17 January. Three days later, the first two Hmong ADC companies graduated from Padong. Another day after that, they drew first blood when 20 guerrillas ambushed a Pathet Lao column south of Xieng Khouangville.

Back at Padong, communist forces had not materialised after three days, allowing PARU to begin a new training cycle. Joining them were the first two up-country CIA paramilitary advisors. The first, Joe Hudachek, was a former U.S. Army airborne instructor during the Second World War. Assisting him was William Young, a young officer who, because of his missionary upbringing along the Thai-Burmese border, was fluent in Lao and several hill tribe dialects.

By the second week of February, five Hmong companies had graduated from Padong, two more were in training, and four more were waiting in the pipeline outside the camp. With this fast-expanding force, Vang Pao spent the remainder of the month harassing communist traffic near Xieng Khouangville.

As more companies passed through the gates of Padong, it was apparent that the Momentum program had surpassed the best efforts of just five Thai and two CIA advisors. Already, during the first week of February a request had been sent back to Washington for more CIA-funded PARU for assignment in Military Region 2 (MR 2 – the northeast quadrant of Laos comprising Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces). This proposal was approved on 24 February, with the Thai to be in-country by month's end.



Jack Shirley, Momentum advisor at San Tiau, spring 1961. (Photo courtesy William Andresevic)

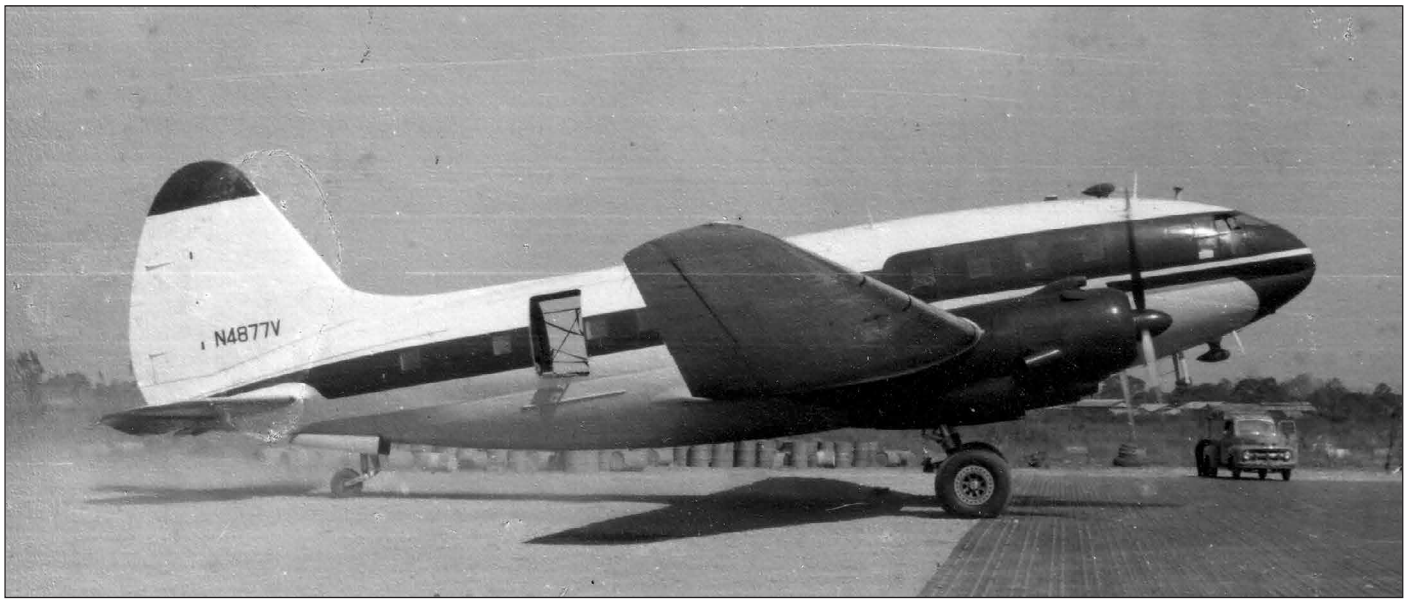
When additional PARU did arrive, they did not come alone. During the first week of March, Air America H-34s landed three more CIA officers at Padong. The first, Tom Fosmire, had earlier been a PARU advisor at Hua Hin and more recently had trained CIA-backed Tibetan guerrillas at Camp Hale, Colorado. The second, Jack Shirley, was an integral part of the PARU organisation, having been among the three Americans given commissions in the BPP. The third, Anthony "Tony Poe" Poshepny, a 38-year-old former U.S. Marine, had entered the CIA in 1952 and had participated in the covert CIA paramilitary operation in Indonesia as well as the Tibetan training program.

From Padong, the three advisors headed for new camps. Fosmire took a newly arrived PARU team 15 kilometres west of the PDJ to the village of Ban Na. Within a couple of days, Ban Na was opened as Momentum's second training site. One group of trainees came from the vicinity of Phou Fa, 15 kilometres northwest of Moung Soui. Upon completion of their instruction, this group returned to their highland redoubt to form Momentum's third training base. With them went Tony Poe and another new PARU team. There they cleared a crude short take-off and landing (STOL) runway, which, angled like a ski slope with a sheer drop off the end, quickly earned the nickname "Agony."

By mid-March, an Air America H-34 landed at Ban Na with a sixth CIA advisor, Lloyd "Pat" Landry. Nearly a decade in the CIA, Landry had seen action in Berlin, Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. With Landry taking over at Ban Na, this allowed Fosmire to establish a new base directly east of the PDJ at Tha Lin Noi.

As Tha Lin Noi became operational, Jack Shirley and a PARU team opened yet another training site near the village of San Tiau, 16 kilometres northeast of Tha Lin Noi. There Shirley was joined by a second advisor, Thomas Ahern, a CIA desk officer at the Vientiane embassy eager for a field assignment.

As March came to a close, this lean force of seven CIA advisors, five PARU teams, and Vang Pao's fledgling guerrilla army had managed to complete a loose ring around the PDJ. To airdrop and airland supplies, the CIA relied on two sources. The first was Air America, the Agency's proprietary. The backbone of the Air America fleet was the C-46, capable of hauling up to 14,000 pounds of cargo. Over the next year, the airline would receive other types of aircraft – courtesy of the U.S. government – including five C-123Bs on loan from the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and DHC-4 Caribou transports bailed from the U.S. Army. In addition, the CIA arranged for kickers – air freight handlers that literally kicked cargo out the doors of flying aircraft



A Bird & Sons C-46 taxis at Wattay airbase in January 1962. The plane was white with a dark blue stripe. This aircraft crashed on 3 August 1962 while resupplying Hmong guerrillas at Phou Fa, killing all five crewmen. (Photo courtesy William H. Bird)

PARU Captain Lippo stands next to one of the four Scottish Aviation Twin Pioneers that Bird & Sons acquired from Philippine Air Lines in 1963. The plane still bears Philippine registry on the tail. (Author's collection)

– to be lent from the Forestry Service's smoke-jumping units in the U.S. Northwest.

The second contract airline was Bird & Sons. Founded by William Bird, owner of a heavy construction firm, Bird & Sons had begun in late 1960 with a single C-45 flown by Robert "Dutch" Brongersma. The CIA, looking for a reliable, deniable non-proprietary to supplement Air America, warmed to Bird and Brongersma. Very quickly, Bird amassed a diverse fleet, purchasing large transports like the C-46, small prop-planes like the Beech Baron and Twin Bonanza, and STOL aircraft like the German-built Do-28 and PC-6 Pilatus Porter. The CIA, meantime, arranged for PARU commandos to be seconded as kickers.

As expected, the communists began to react to the spread of the Momentum guerrilla camps. At San Tiau, for example, Hmong ADCs started trading heavy-weapons fire with PAVN gunners supporting the Pathet Lao. On 19 April, the North Vietnamese switched to infantry and began a ground assault on the base. Holding for four days, the guerrillas, PARU advisors, and CIA officers Shirley and Ahern headed south; the Americans and Thai were recovered the following day by Air America H-34s.

In May, the ax fell on a second Momentum site. At 1930 hours on 12 May, PARU Team B at Moung Ngat came under heavy PAVN fire. Two PARU were killed and the other two wounded as they fled the location.

Even though two Momentum sites had been lost, the overall number of Hmong guerrillas by May had reached the 5,000 mark. As funding for the first 2,000 had been borne by the Department of Defense, the U.S. Military Advisory and Assistance Group in Laos took it as its prerogative to insist that U.S. Army Special Forces (USSF) advisors be incorporated into the training effort. Pressured, the CIA acquiesced to a Special Forces team at Padong.

The incorporation of Special Forces advisors into Momentum was to prove awkward and redundant. Though the USSF team leader at Padong spoke French – which enabled him to communicate with some elderly Hmong – the younger Special Forces advisors leaned heavily on PARU to act as translators; in effect, the Special Forces assumed the training role already being performed more efficiently by Thai commandos.

In addition, the arrival of U.S. military advisors at Padong attracted greater attention from communist forces. By late April, the Pathet Lao dragged a 75mm pack howitzer into the hills off the southern tip of the plain and began to shell the base. Even as truce talks got under way in mid-May, the bombardment continued. They were soon joined by three companies from the PAVN 148th Regiment, which on 6 June launched a concerted assault against Padong from the north. Jack Shirley, who had replaced Joe Hudachek as Padong's senior CIA advisor, joined an exodus of Hmong, Special Forces, and PARU. By the next morning, H-34 choppers caught up with the column and whisked away the Americans and Thai.

As unconventional warriors, in which mobility and flexibility are key, the Hmong had suffered only a slight setback with the loss of Padong. The Air America evacuation choppers did not go far before dropping off the PARU team and Special Forces advisors at the village of Pha Khao, 12 kilometres southwest of Padong. There, setting up a new camp, the Thai and U.S. trainers began the next Momentum training cycle within days.

Guerrillas on the Bolovens

As Momentum was taking root in the northeast, a parallel guerrilla effort was launched on the Bolovens Plateau in the southern panhandle. Bracketed by the Mekong to the west and the Se Kong valley to the east, the plateau's rich soil and cool temperatures had once made the Bolovens a favourite of colonial plantation owners. Now dominated by pockets of Lao Theung tribesmen, the USSF recognised its strategic geographic significance and in the fall of 1961 finalised plans for the creation of a Bolovens maquis under the codename Pincushion.

For funding, the CIA agreed to cover the Pincushion budget. The CIA also offered the services of its two Bolovens experts: Jean Cadeaux, a prominent French-Vietnamese plantation owner contracted as the Agency's primary liaison with the local tribes; and Roy Moffitt, a paramilitary officer proficient in the Lao Theung dialects and culture.

To start Pincushion, in November 1961 a Special Forces team ventured to Houei Kong, the seat of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) in the eastern Bolovens. Pitching tents east of town, they put out feelers to local Lao Theung tribesmen with promises of rifles and instruction. On 13 December, 100 prospects had assembled and commenced training. Four weeks later, K-1 Company graduated and recruitment began for a second company. To assist in the blossoming training effort, more Special Forces arrived and opened two satellite camps. Together these turned out nearly five more companies.

Along with the training on the Bolovens, a second Pincushion zone was opened north of the plateau near Saravane. The second

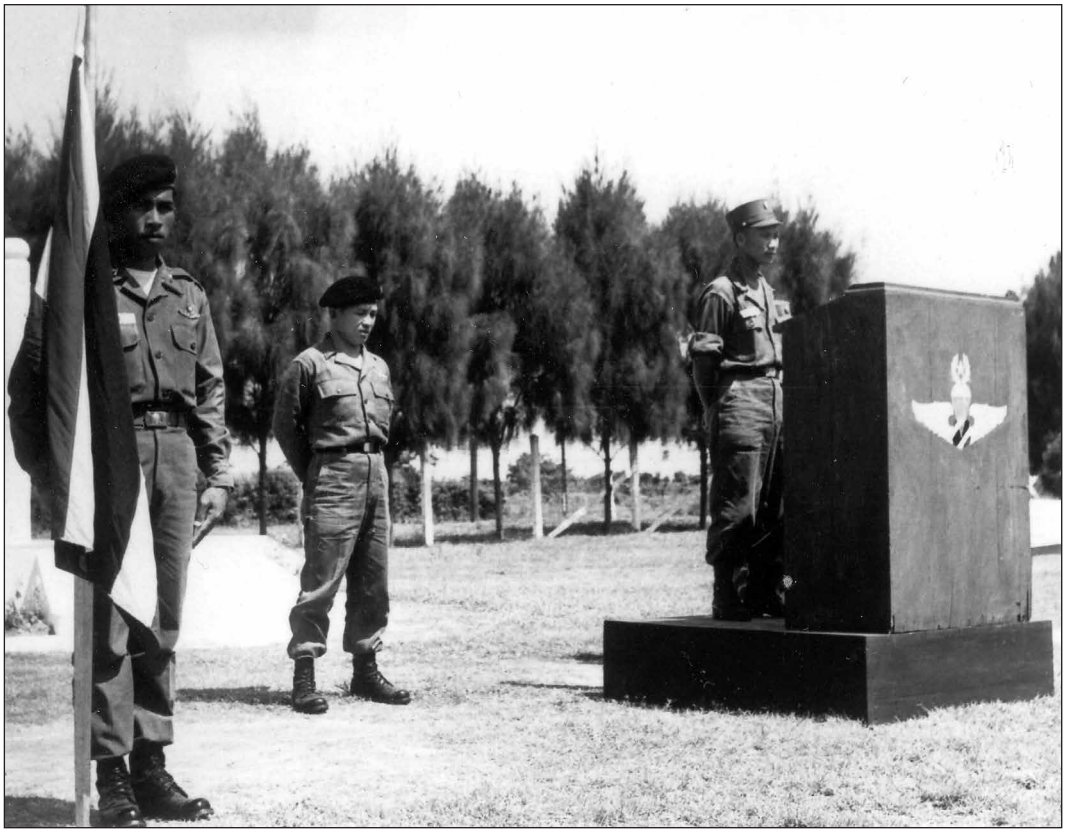
largest town in MR 4 (the military region comprising the southern half of the Lao panhandle), Saravane was deemed a fertile recruiting ground for the next round of Lao Theung maquis. Special Forces soon poured into a campsite 10 kilometres southeast of the town, whereupon instruction commenced for four companies.

Shortly thereafter, Pincushion began to wind down. This was because agreement had been reached in principle during mid-June 1962 to form a new coalition government; the RLG, ever suspicious of hill tribe minorities, displayed little interest in perpetuating an armed Lao Theung force on the Bolovens following the likely departure of USSF advisors under a coalition arrangement.

As the USSF started to leave, the last six-man team near Saravane began training a CIA-sanctioned Special Cadre. Up to that time, the CIA, apart from paying the bills, had remained largely detached from Pincushion. As an eleventh-hour move, however, the CIA wanted a 32-man Special Cadre as a stay-behind nucleus for a future resistance movement and intelligence net. Over the course of the next two months, the USSF team offered intensive weapons and agent tradecraft instruction to this contingent.

Following a field training exercise west of Saravane, Special Cadre training ended on 10 September. Four days later the last USSF advisors departed the Bolovens, leaving the Lao Theung maquis to their own devices.

Colonel Vang Pao and a PARU officer inspect Hmong SOT trainees at Camp Naresuan, Hua Hin, Thailand, before a parachute training jump during early August 1962. (Pat Landry Collection, Air America Archives)

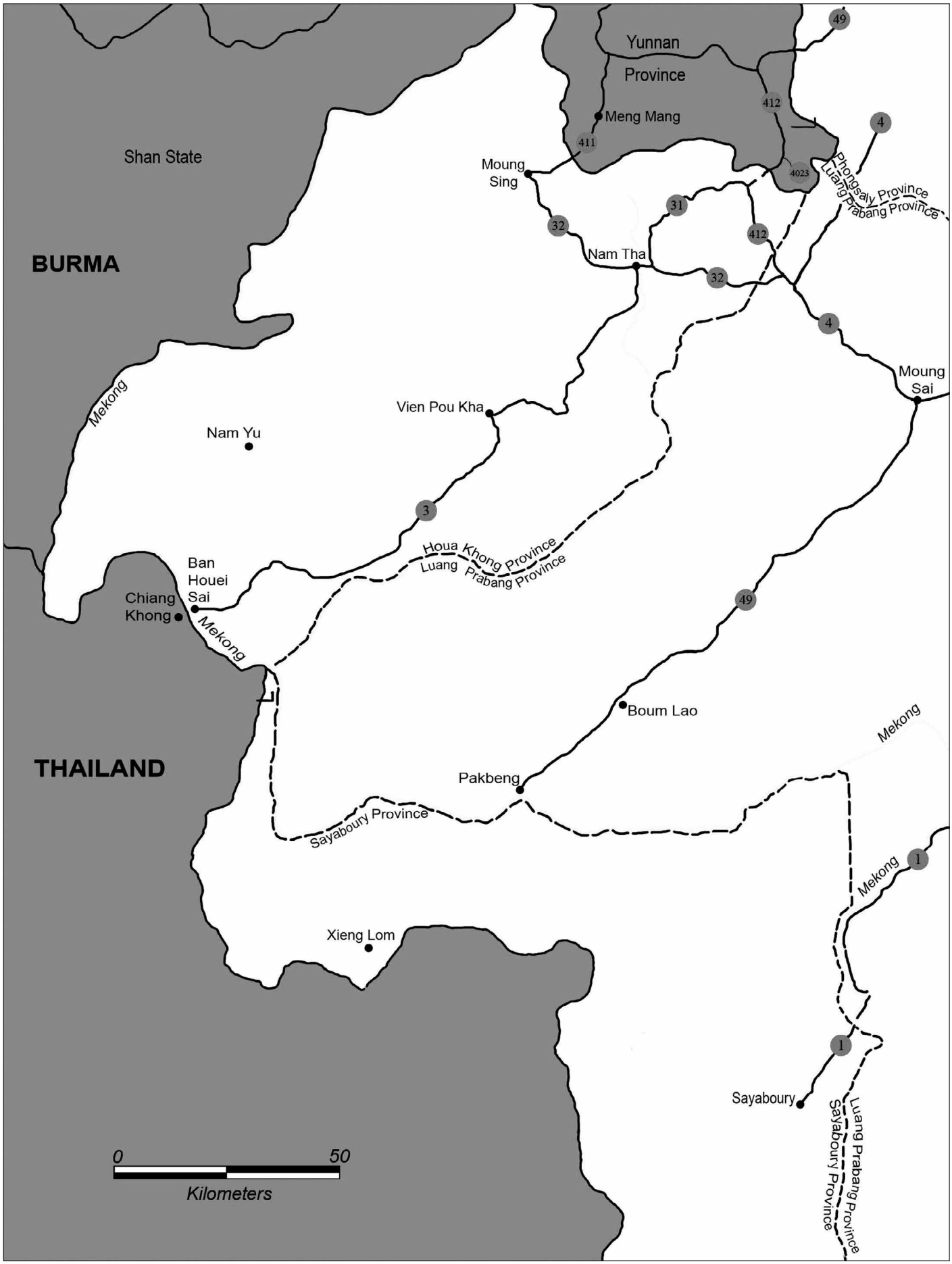


Colonel Vang Pao delivers the graduation speech to SOT students at Camp Naresuan, Hua Hin, August 1962. Thai police parachute wings are on the podium. (Pat Landry Collection, Air America Archives)

Expanding Momentum

In contrast to its peripheral involvement in Pincushion, the CIA retained a close hold over the Momentum program in the north. Control of the Momentum network emanated from a rustic compound at Wattay airport, including one house for the Kaw Taw staff, one holding PARU's rear communications base, another for a Hmong liaison officer, and the last containing the CIA's rear paramilitary staff headed by Bill Lair and assisted by Pat Landry (who had come down from Ban Na).

Up-country, Momentum training had continued in the wake of a May 1961 cease-fire, with Washington giving permission in August (following a series of communist cease-fire violations) for an increase to 12,000 guerrillas.



Western Military Region 1. (Author's map)

Bill Lair and PARU officers at Camp Naresuan, Hua Hin, after being awarded the Rattanaporn Medal by the King of Thailand for their service in Laos. Front row: PARU commander Pranet Ritileuchai (fourth from right), Bill Lair (third from right), Cherdchamras Jitkarunras (far right); middle row: Santi Intakon (third from left), Decha Dunrat (fourth from right); back row: Prasert Kwangkaew (second from left). (Photo courtesy William Lair)

In December 1961, a key transition period began as the CIA started turning over control of the Momentum network to the Hmong themselves. The vehicle by which the CIA sought to do this was the Special Operations Team (SOT), a 12-man Hmong unit intentionally modelled after the PARU. Back in August, the first wave of 120 SOT candidates, selected on the basis of education and clan background, had been sent to the PARU base at Hua Hin for four months of leadership, weapons, communications, and parachute training.

Lifted back to MR 2 in December 1961, the SOTs were deployed to forward sites. Some operated alongside PARU; others replaced PARU altogether. Still other SOTs moved into fresh territory. For example, east of the PDJ – which PARU had vacated in the spring of 1961 – two SOTs were in operation by early 1962.

In February 1962, a second group of 160 Hmong trainees departed for SOT instruction at Hua Hin. As with the first contingent, upon completion of training some joined PARU at established sites in Xieng Khouang Province, while others assumed responsibility from PARU.

Some of these new SOTs ventured into Sam Neua Province. Through the first quarter of 1962, little Momentum activity had been registered in that province apart from the assignment of a single PARU team. In May, however, came a surge in paramilitary operations as Tony Poe oversaw the arrival of two more PARU detachments: Team H to Pha Bong and Team D to Hong Non. The following month, Team G shifted atop Phou Phathi mountain. Dispatched to the province, too, were four Hmong SOTs.

Concurrent with the expansion of Momentum into Sam Neua came creation of a new paramilitary formation, the Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU). Ambiguously titled, the SGUs were intended as enhanced ADCs that could go on the offense. In May 1962, 500 Hmong trainees had been dispatched to Hua Hin for four weeks of guerrilla and parachute training. Unlike the 12-man SOTs, these Hmong went through the cycle as five 100-man companies under the overall command of Youa Vang Ly, a former Hmong non-commissioned officer in the French Union Army. Upon return in mid-June, the 500 were dispersed to four different Momentum sites.

Meantime, as the PARU and SOTs expanded the Momentum network in an unconventional manner, the USSF was moving in a more conventional direction. This became readily apparent in March 1962 when USSF advisors converged on the village of Sam Thong, 22 kilometres northwest of Pha Khao. Within two months, Sam Thong was transformed from a backwater into Momentum's training showpiece. The airstrip was extended to handle aircraft up to the C-123B, and the USSF contingent expanded to more than 30 advisors commanded by a major. A SOT team joined them in late July.

That same month, the three Lao factions – Royalist, Neutralist, and Pathet Lao – agreed to a tripartite coalition as codified in a Geneva agreement. Even before these accords had been ratified, however, the U.S. was taking steps to close down Momentum. No new weapons had been issued to the Hmong as of 27 June, and ammunition drops were suspended on 21 July. The USSF, too, began to wrap up its activities at Sam Thong; by mid-September, after graduating nine ADC companies and one airborne platoon, the last Special Forces advisor left the camp.

Down at Hua Hin, a final Hmong SOT cycle finished its instruction on 6 August and was shuttled to Sam Thong. Deployed across MR 2 by month's end, they allowed for the repatriation of four PARU teams. That still left five Thai teams in the field to continue with last-minute training.

With time running out before the Geneva agreement mandated that all foreign military personnel leave in October, the CIA and Kaw Taw began devoting increased assets to forging – as a paramilitary insurance policy – an alternative guerrilla network closer to the Thai border in MR 1 (comprising the northwestern quadrant of the kingdom). This program had started back in January 1962, when a PARU team shifted to Sayaboury Province with CIA case officer William Young, the polyglot Momentum advisor originally at Padong.

Apart from arming and equipping 30 guerrillas that month, Young and the PARU team kept a low profile through the spring. Beginning in May, however, PARU began to devote serious attention to the MR 1 network. Over the next month, three new PARU teams were introduced to the region: Team I at Chiang Khong, the Thai town on the Mekong opposite Ban Houei Sai; Team J in northern Sayaboury Province; and Team L in southern Sayaboury. Two more teams joined them in July. In the end, however, though the PARU contribution to the effort was sizable, few MR 1 guerrillas were actually raised.

Back in MR 2, by the third week of September 1962 the USSF was out of Sam Thong. The training site left behind by the Special Forces – the best in MR 2 – was too well known to communist

propagandists. The camps at Ban Na and Pha Khao, meanwhile, had hazardous runways. Looking elsewhere for a suitable post-Geneva headquarters, Colonel Vang Pao (who was promoted in October 1961) came to consider the valley of Long Tieng, 10 kilometres southeast of Sam Thong. Located at the base of a 1,600-meter-tall ridgeline, Long Tieng until early 1962 had hosted little more than a quiet Lao Theung village and, after that, a Hmong refugee settlement.

Not long afterward, the war caught up to Long Tieng. By May 1962, Air America light aircraft were frequenting its grass airfield. The following month, a SOT began operation in the valley. Vang Pao himself had taken a Helio Courier into Long Tieng on 15 August for a personal inspection. He liked the site, as did his advisors. The decision made, a new PARU headquarters detachment, named Team Z, was formed on 20 September and dispatched to Long Tieng. One month later, the refugee settlement was relocated to Sam Thong, with relocation costs borne by the CIA. In its wake, Vang Pao and his staff marched into the serene valley. Momentum had a new home.

2
NAVIGATING NEUTRALITY

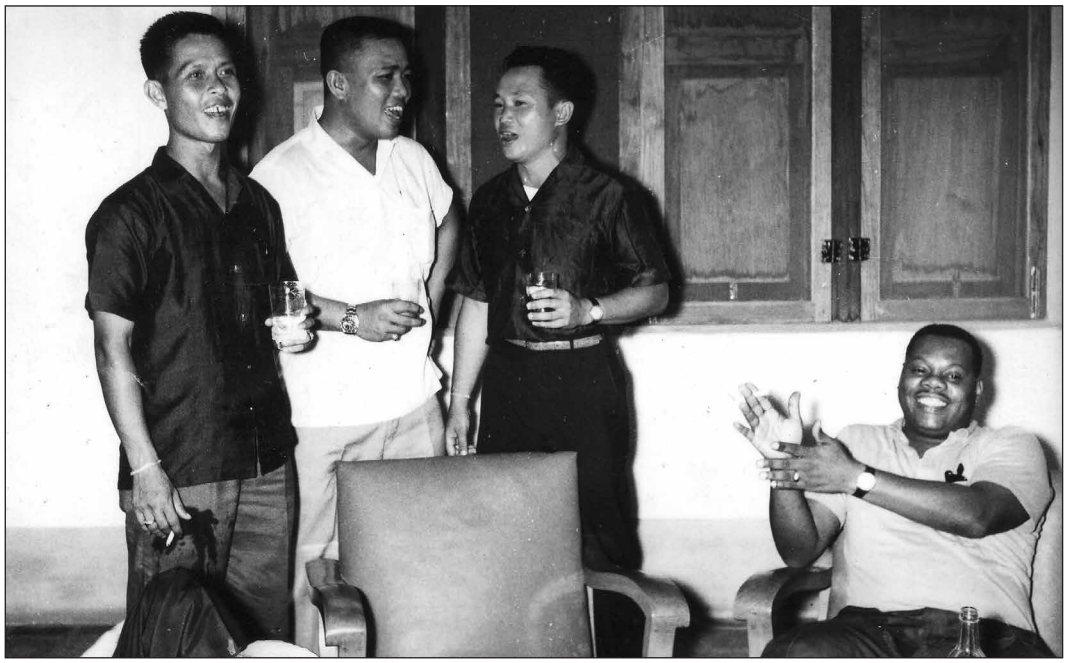
On the eve of the Geneva accords taking effect, the U.S. Embassy had given thought to keeping at least some of its up-country CIA paramilitary options open. But with Washington's dictum to abide by the letter of the agreement, this had been difficult. The Pincushion network in the southern panhandle, after all, had been disbanded in September. Bill Lair's Wattay office, moreover, had been forced to relocate with Kaw Taw to a small compound at Nong Khai, the Thai town across the Mekong from Vientiane. And though contract airlines were allowed to continue humanitarian food drops to the Hmong, they were under strict orders not to haul any troops or ammunition.

But while abiding by the letter of the accords, Washington allowed the CIA to sidestep its spirit. Accordingly, three PARU teams had been retained in MR 1 along the Thai-Lao frontier. Moreover, Art Elmore, a former Momentum case officer from MR 2, was for a brief time kept in Thailand's Nan Province bordering Sayaboury.

In MR 2, two PARU teams remained. At Long Tieng was Team Z, responsible for Xieng Khouang Province. At Hong Non was Team V, handling Sam Neua Province. In addition, Washington gave special approval for the CIA to retain two case officers in the region. The first, Tony Poe, rotated among far-flung Hmong outposts. The second, a young Princeton graduate named Vint Lawrence, was named liaison to Vang Pao and was, technically, Poe's boss.

With this minimal presence in MR 2, the CIA tried to maintain contact with at least some of the 13,500-man Momentum network, especially those in Xieng Khouang Province. Upon the cessation of military assistance, however, the CIA knew it would eventually lose control over many of the Hmong partisans. Therefore, to salvage the cream of the guerrilla crop, in December Vang Pao called to Long Tieng all 500 of the SGU trained at Hua Hin earlier that summer. Merged together as a single unit, they became the 1st SGU Battalion under the command of the same officer who had led them through training, Major Youa Vang Ly. Garrisoned at Long Tieng, the battalion was intended to give Vang Pao a mobile reserve force with a stronger punch than his existing ADC companies.

At the same time, in a follow-on to the SOT program, the CIA in December exfiltrated 35 Lao nationals – mostly Hmong from MR 2, along with seven tribesmen from MR 1 – to Thailand. There they were sent to a secluded training centre 29 kilometres east of the town of Phitsanulok. Built during the second half of 1962, the centre, nicknamed Phitscamp, was advised by Jack Shirley and Art Elmore.



PARU Captain Makorn, Captain Surayut, and Colonel Pranet during a light moment at the Nong Khai office used by the CIA and Kaw Taw in 1962. On the right is Ed Johnson, who arrived that year as a Momentum support officer. He died in an August 1965 helicopter crash after visiting Nam Yu. (Photo courtesy Ed Dearborn)

Phitscamp offered two kinds of training. Most students received seven months of SOT instruction, emphasising communications with the RS-1 long-range radio. Others were given Special Leadership Training, a squad-level basic infantry and parachute course designed to polish guerrilla leaders. In addition, some of the trainees remained an additional 11 months for advanced instruction in radio repair.

Meantime, back in MR 2 dissent was spreading within the ranks of Kong Le's Neutralist faction by the end of the first quarter of 1963. As the fragile coalition arrangement gave way to resumed strife,

Vientiane Station Chief Charles Whitehurst visits Hmong guerrilla forces at Long Tieng, early 1964. Brigadier General Vang Pao is on the right, Major Youa Vang Ly on the left. (Author's collection)

PARU Colonel Pranet hands out awards to PARU advisors at Long Tieng, early 1964. In the rear (left to right): Brigadier General Vang Pao, Kaw Taw commander Thongchai "Pinit" Nipitsukakan, and RTA Colonel Tawatchai Nakvanit. (Author's collection)

entire Neutralist battalions switched their loyalty to the Pathet Lao, pushing Kong Le off part of the plain and stirring the Kennedy White House to action. On 10 April, just as the CIA was helping arrange a discrete rapprochement between Vang Pao and Kong Le, Washington pragmatically authorised covert deliveries of military supplies to both the Neutralists and Hmong ADC.

Ready to coordinate assistance to the Hmong was Bill Lair and his Kaw Taw counterparts, who had since left their cramped facilities at Nong Khai and moved to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB). There Lair initially set up shop in an abandoned civil aviation building, earning the office the nickname "AB 1" due to the aviation code painted on the roof. Officially given the innocuous title of 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), Lair's Udorn base became the rear headquarters for all paramilitary activities in Laos. Kaw Taw, occupying a single-story wooden complex adjacent to the CIA building, was given the new cover designation of "Headquarters 333." Meantime, a CIA paramilitary logistical centre – codenamed Salt Shaker – was established at Takhli RTAFB.

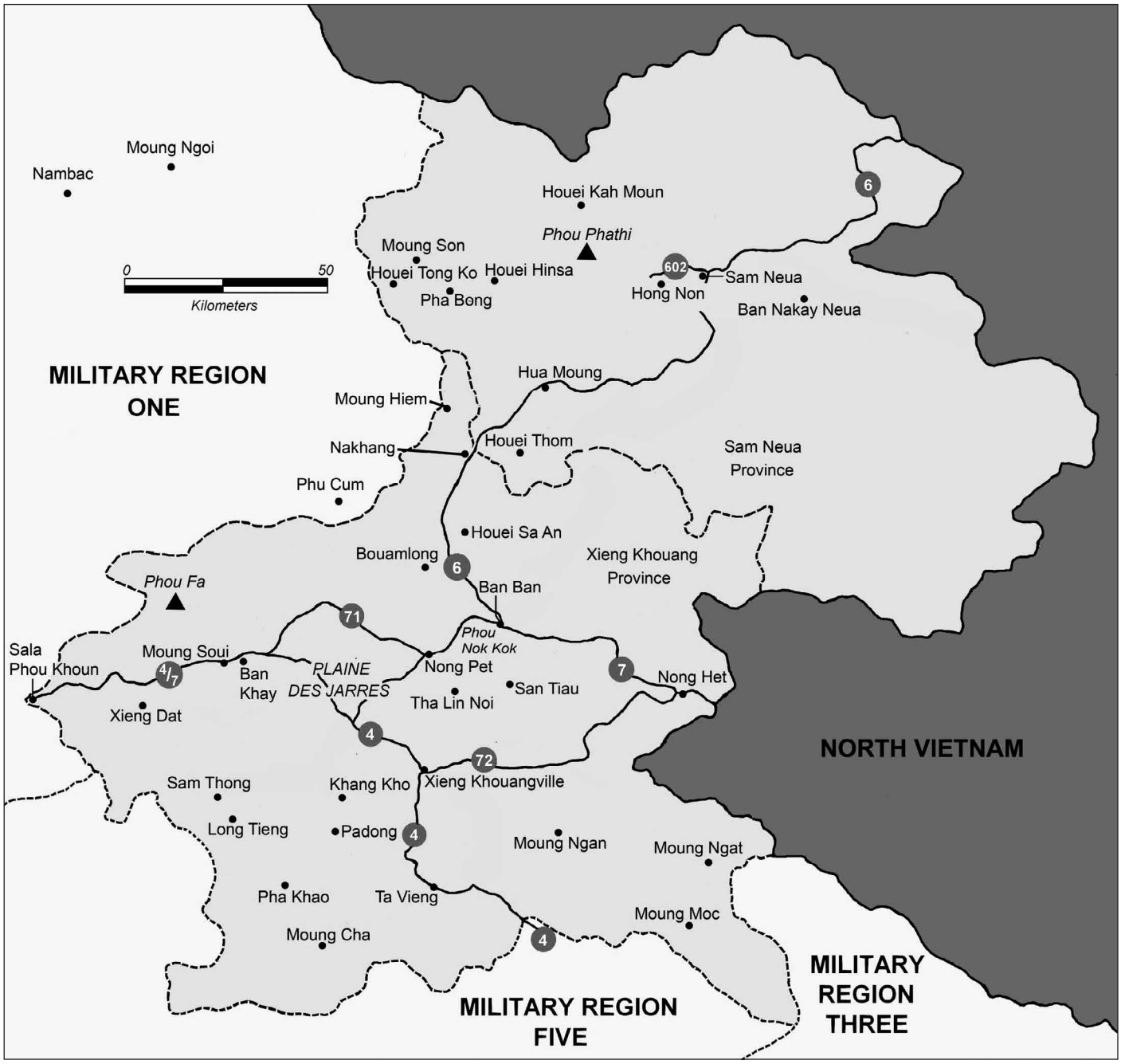
With the weapons pipeline reopened, Hmong ADC, acting on orders from their CIA advisors in Long Tieng, had by 20 April hauled a 75mm pack howitzer and 57mm recoilless rifle toward the PDJ and within range of Pathet Lao-held Khang Khay and Ban Liang, the PAVN compound four kilometres to the east. Though the Hmong were under orders not to fire, their deployment successfully diverted attention from Kong Le's men. Simultaneously, U.S. ammunition drops were made to ADC converging north and south of Xieng Khouangville. Other Hmong elements reinforced Neutralist units at the PDJ village of Lat Houang, while still other Hmong pre-positioned themselves to cut Route 7 east of Nong Pet.

As the coalition continued to fray, by mid-year Kennedy gave the nod to further increases in paramilitary operations, to include more SGU formations and increased use of PARU. By the late summer of 1963, contract airliners were revisiting sites like Long Tieng and Sam Thong to rebuilt depleted weapons stores.

For his part, Vang Pao was looking to reinvigorate the ADC net that had been spread across Sam Neua in the months before the Geneva accords took effect. Using the five SOTs and one PARU team still in Sam Neua, he combined them with a residual FAR presence and during the second half of the year began infiltrating in a counter-clockwise arc around the provincial capital. Though their gains were fleeting – communist forces retook lost territory within a month – the operation put yet another feather in Vang Pao's cap, helping earn the Hmong leader a promotion to brigadier general at year's end.

In neighbouring Xieng Khouang, Kong Le's Neutralists in early 1964 were under increasing pressure. In an April meeting brokered by the CIA, Kong Le was enticed to travel to Sam Thong for a private session with Vang Pao. In a resultant agreement between the two generals, Kong Le promised to continue fighting even if pushed from the PDJ, while Vang Pao pledged his Hmong would offer the Neutralists sanctuary should they be run off the plain.

By the following month, this was put to the test when Kong Le was forced to shift his headquarters to the western edge of the plain.



Military Region 2. (Author's map)

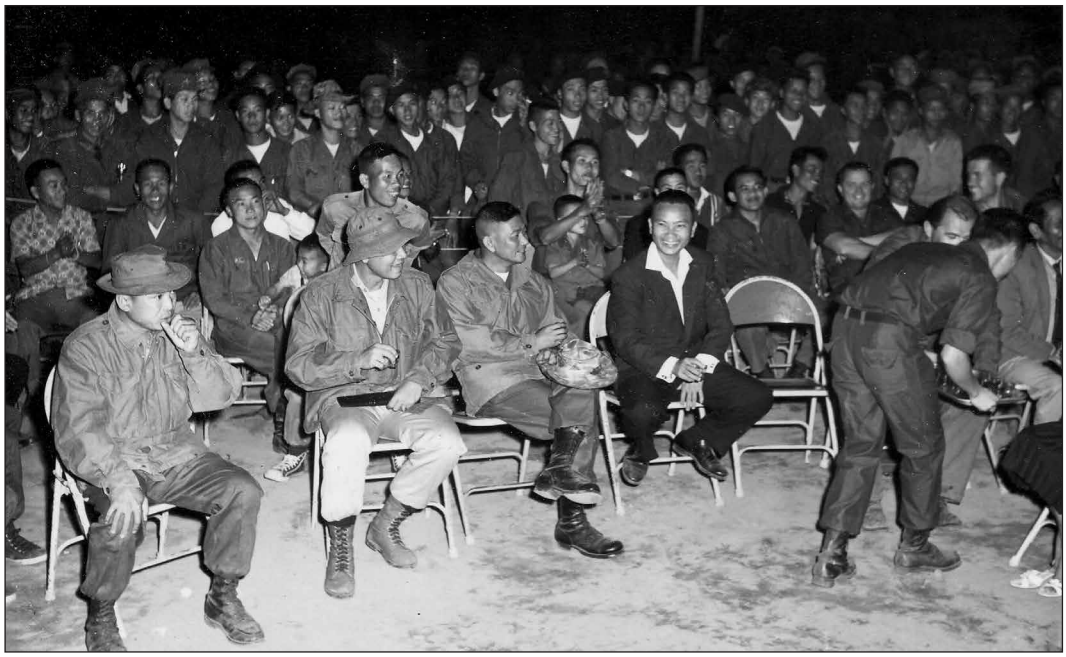
Meanwhile, Vang Pao had already begun redistributing his ADC forces around Khang Kho – in the hills off the southern PDJ – in an attempt to divert communist attention. This was to no avail, as the Neutralists continued their withdrawal to Moung Soui, a town west of the plain.

To boost defences at this new position, Kong Le sent a request for RTA artillery. There was ample precedent for this: back in April 1961, FAR requested two RTA artillery batteries to bolster their defences in Thakhek and Savannakhet. Codenamed Star Shine, the batteries remained for a single month before withdrawing in the face of shrill Pathet Lao protests. This time around, Headquarters 333 on 4 July 1964 approved artillery support under the codename Project 008. That day, a 279-man RTA composite artillery battalion – given the innocuous title of Special Requirements 1 (SR 1) – was loaded aboard Air America C-123s at Korat, Thailand. Flown directly to the Neutralist base, the Thai unit, outfitted with one 155mm and five 105mm howitzers, added considerable heavy-weapons backbone to Kong Le's headquarters.

Hardnose in the Panhandle

Away from the battles taking place in northern Laos, the U.S. government was eager to probe the communist supply corridor – dubbed the Ho Chi Minh Trail – extending down the eastern Lao panhandle toward South Vietnam. In February 1962, Vientiane Station assigned Mike Deuel, a Cornell graduate and second-generation CIA officer, to begin a fledgling paramilitary effort in this vicinity. Arriving at Thakhek, Deuel focused on Route 8 in the upper panhandle between Lak Sao and Nhommarath. Using lesson learned from a trial trail-watching program in MR 2 the previous year, Deuel moulded road-watchers from Lao villagers equipped with nothing more complicated than a camera and plastic-coated picture cards to identify vehicles.

To oversee his road-watchers, Deuel was augmented by a fresh PARU detachment, Team W. By May 1962, these PARU commandos were deployed in a mountain valley adjacent to Phou Sang, 46 kilometres north of Nhommarath. From there, they received reports from indigenous road-watching teams operating southeast



The Kaw Taw commander, RTA Colonel Thongchai "Pinit" Nipitsukakan (front row, third from left), and Vang Pao conduct to a toast amidst a gathering of PARU and Hmong guerrillas at Long Tieng, early 1964. PARU commander Pranet is on the left and PARU Captain Decha is second from left. In the second row is Bird & Sons pilot Lloyd Zimmerman (second from right with crossed arms) and CIA officer Mike Lynch (far right). (Author's collection)

PARU parachute instructors with Hmong students at Long Tieng, circa 1965. In the rear is their jump plane, CASI Twin Pioneer XW-PBJ. (Author's collection)

and north of Phou Sang, then radioed the information to Thakhek. Communist forces, however, got wise to the activity and by late June were manoeuvring against Phou Sang. With Deuel hovering overhead in a Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) Alouette II, an Air America H-34 landed on the mountain for a successful emergency exfiltration. Team W was not redeployed and MR 3's first trail-watching venture (MR 3 encompassed the upper half of the Lao panhandle) was subsequently brought to a close.

With the Geneva accords coming into effect during October 1962, Vientiane Station was severely handicapped in its ability to maintain tabs on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In the upper panhandle, Mike Deuel had been ordered to relocate from Thakhek across the Mekong to the Thai town of Nakhon Phanom, thus complicating his efforts to retain contact with Khammouane's thin paramilitary network. Further south, Pincushion – which carried the potential for Lao Theung guerrilla operations against the Trail – was closed down and the 32 men of the Special Cadre dispatched back to their home villages to act as triggers for future paramilitary action.

Building on this scant foundation, in early November 1962 the CIA assigned a two-man team to Nakhon Phanom to restart trail-watching in the upper panhandle. Heading the pair was Richard Holm, a French-speaking former U.S. Army intelligence officer. "There was a bare skeleton in place on the ground," recalled Holm. "I set about the task of adding meat."

By January 1963, Holm had sketched out a plan to dispatch teams along the Trail as best he could. This was given a green light and a codename: Operation Hardnose. Assisting him in these matters would be a new iteration of Team W, the Thai unit previously driven off of Phou Sang. Though all previous Thai teams in Laos had been drawn exclusively from PARU, the Royal Thai Army Special Forces (RTSF) now wanted a cut of the action. As a result, this newest version of Team W was evenly divided between six PARU and six RTSF soldiers.

To reduce the chances of exposure, Team W shuttled each morning from Nakhon Phanom to a remote MR 3 training site – dubbed Siberia – 15 kilometres east of Thakhek. There they trained ADC and road-watch teams until late afternoon, then were lifted back to Nakhon Phanom for the night.

With these fresh trail-watchers graduated by Team W, Nakhon Phanom attempted to once again place Route 8 under surveillance. The guerrillas endured extended hikes to their targets, as helicopters were not yet allocated. As before, they were given cameras to substantiate their claims; one came back with pictures of communist porters using elephants.

Farther south, a simultaneous Hardnose effort in MR 4 was launched. Orchestrating this project was Mike Deuel, who in the summer of 1963 had started making occasional forays from Thailand into Laos. Venturing to Saravane to recontact Pincushion (including Special Cadre) remnants, Deuel selected the most promising for instruction at Phitscamp. Trained in leadership and road-watch techniques, the class graduated in the fall of 1963.

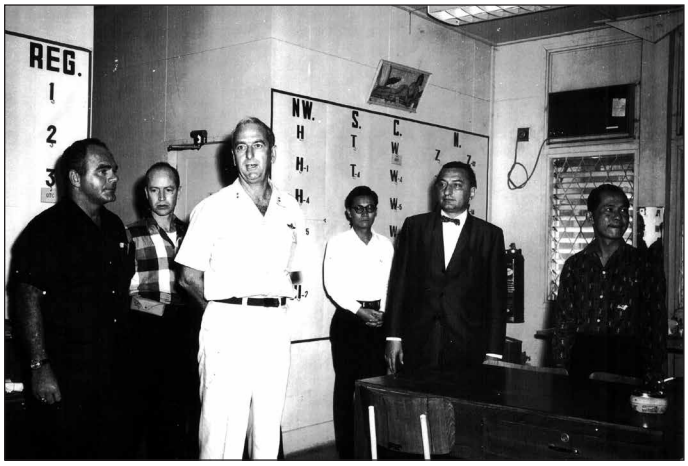
PARU parachute instructors with Brigadier General Vang Pao, circa 1965. Although he posed with a parachute, the general never actually jumped. (Photo courtesy Sanit Nakajitti)

In 1963, the 4802nd JLD shifted its office from Nong Khai to an abandoned civil aviation building at Udorn RTAFB. Here the CIA's deputy chief of the Far East Division, Robert Myers (second from left) visits the Udorn office, circa 1965. The 4802nd chief, Bill Lair, is left. The Headquarters 333 commander, Colonel Vitoon "Dhep" Yasawasdi, is second from right. RTA Colonel Tawatchai Nakvanit, also with Headquarters 333, is on the far right. Data on Thai teams deployed to northwest Laos (Team Hotel) and south Laos (Team Tango) are on the wall behind Dhep. (Author's collection)

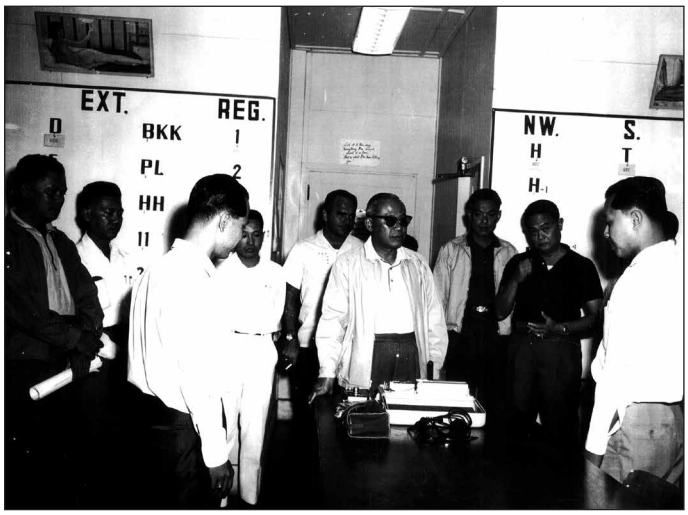
Joined by a six-man PARU detachment codenamed Team T, they set up camp near Saravane for deployment along the Trail. Operating in their home districts, these tribal detachments met with considerable initial success. By May 1964, the program was increased to 20 radio-equipped Lao Theung teams extending from the Saravane vicinity south to the Cambodian border.

Seasonal Battles

While Hardnose was registering successes in the panhandle, General Vang Pao had endured trying times over the course of 1964. In January, the Pathet Lao struck at two of his original Momentum sites, Tha Lin Noi and Houei Sa An. The first attack overwhelmed the garrison's ADC defenders; the second was turned back, just. More depressing news came from Sam Neua Province in February, when communist forces overran five outposts in short order.



USAF Major General Theodore Milton (Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations, US Pacific Command) visits the original 4802nd JLD office at Udorn RTAFB in 1965. The 4802nd JLD deputy chief, Pat Landry, is on the left. George Kalaris, the Vientiane deputy station chief, is second from right. Headquarters 333 commander Dhep is on the right. (Author's collection)



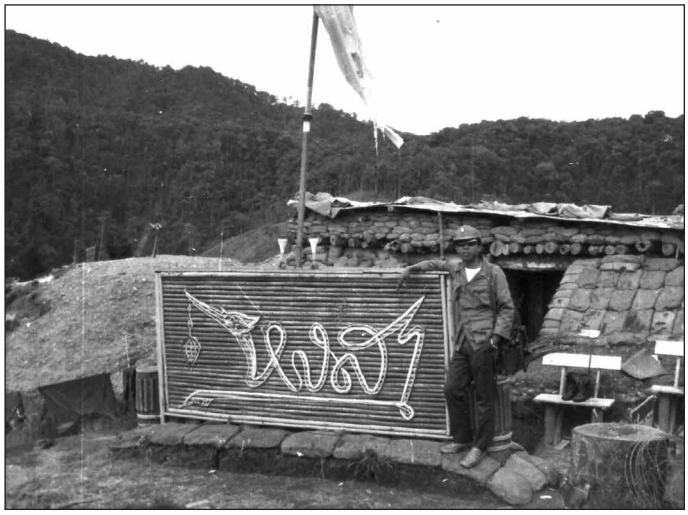
Thai Field Marshal Thanom Kittakachorn (with sunglasses) visits the original 4802nd JLD office at Udorn, 1965. The 4802nd deputy chief, Pat Landry, stands to the rear. Senior Thai officers include General Kriangsak Chomanan (left), Colonel Tawatchai Nakvanit (second from left), Headquarters 333 chief Dhep (third from left), PARU commander Pranet (fourth from left), and General Paitoon "Petch" Inkatanawat (third from right). (Author's collection)

Hmong guerrillas fire a 75mm pack howitzer on an M1 carriage in northeastern Laos, 1965. (Author's collection)

During April, Vang Pao's string of setbacks continued. Under fire this time was Phou Nong, the garrison just south of the Ban Ban valley. Communist forces had been trying to take this region on the

RTA officers at Moung Soui erect a memorial to the first SR contingent, 1965. (Author's collection)

Neutralist leader Kong Le (second from right) and Headquarters 333 deputy commander Dhonnadit "Dhon" Sudhides (third from right) visit the memorial to the first SR contingent at Moung Soui, 1965. (Author's collection)



Thai SR headquarters at Moung Soui, 1967. The Thai script reads "Hongsa," the name of a mythical Thai goose. (Author's collection)

One of the SR 105mm howitzer batteries at Moung Soui. The Thai inscription reads "Vicious Tiger." (Author's collection)

Many of the early Momentum bases featured treacherous dirt runways that pushed STOL aircraft to their limits – and sometimes beyond. This strip at Phou Nong had a pronounced bend at the midway point. (Photo courtesy Sanit Nakajitti)

cheap for two years but had repeatedly been faced down by one of Vang Pao's best guerrilla commanders, Major Chong Shoua Yang. This time, however, the communists got serious, dispatching one Pathet Lao and three PAVN battalions during the last week of April.

Outgunned, Chong Shoua Yang's 250 ADC members and some 9,000 Hmong refugees, plus a FAR contingent, withdrew southeast. Repeatedly ambushed, dozens of Hmong civilians were killed before the column arrived at Moung Moc 12 days later.

Following these two quarters of territorial losses, Vang Pao took time to expand his strike forces. By the late summer of 1964 he had assembled a second SGU battalion at Long Tieng. Under the command of Captain Ly Teng, a 1962 Hua Hin graduate, 2nd SGU Battalion was heavily laced with Lao Theung troops recruited from Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, and Phongsaly provinces, part of a conscious effort by Vang Pao to bolster ties with that hilltribe minority.

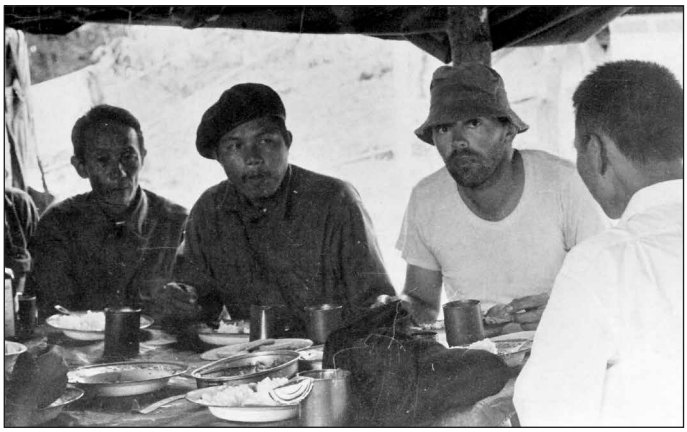
That fall, resurgent Hmong forces sallied forth for a late rainy season landgrab. Little was accomplished other than returning San Tiau, fallen to communist forces early in the year, to government hands. This minimal gain, however, had come too late in the monsoons, certain to be negated with the New Year and its promise of a communist dry season surge.

As anticipated, in mid-January 1965 communist forces launched their MR 2 dry season push. In its largest commitment since 1962, PAVN deployed an entire regiment – the 174th from the 316th Division – for operations in the region. Hardest hit was Sam Neua Province, with the communists steamrolling toward the garrison at Hong Non.

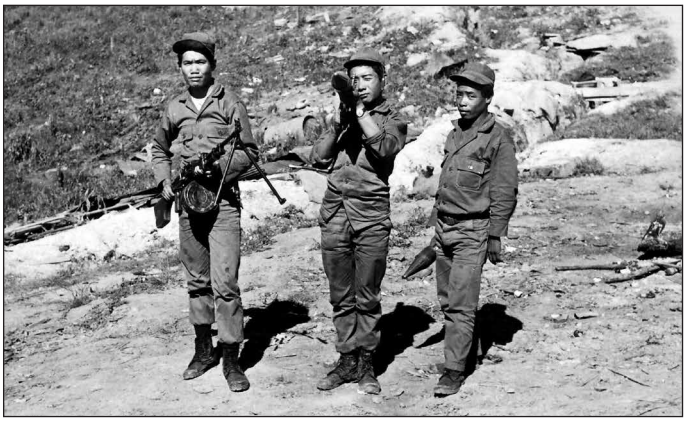
With the North Vietnamese telegraphing their intent, the CIA's Tony Poe flew into Hong Non on the morning of 19 January in an attempt to stiffen the resolve of the camp's skittish ADC defenders. After a quick assessment, he radioed for an emergency shipment of mortar rounds and small-arms ammunition, which began arriving via an Air America Helio Courier shuttle throughout the afternoon.

After a quiet night, North Vietnamese infantry the next morning struck Hong Non from two sides. At the site's airfield, Tony Poe and PARU Team V were directing a defence with 100 ADC militiamen.

Hmong guerrillas hauling mortar rounds from an Air America H-34 chopper, circa 1965. Note that their footwear ranges from combat boots to athletic shoes to nothing at all. (Author's collection)



PARU Captain Decha Dunrat and Tony Poe in northeastern Laos, 1965. In March 1966, Decha died while trying to save the pilot in an Air America Helio Courier crash at Moung Hiem. (Photo courtesy William Andresevic)



Hmong guerrillas practice with a captured RPG-2 grenade launcher and RPD light machine gun, 1965. (Author's collection)

As North Vietnamese infantrymen surged across the runway, five defenders were killed, including the ADC zone commander and a PARU corporal. Five others were wounded: among them, Poe had taken an AK-47 round through the gut just above the groin.

As the wounded case officer was carried into the jungle by two guerrilla medics, an Air America Helio Courier and H-34 arrived overhead. Taking small-arms fire as he hovered with just one wheel touching the ground, the chopper pilot took on Poe and a handful of wounded guerrillas. Rushed back to Hua Moung, Poe was then transferred to a fixed-wing aircraft bound for the USAF hospital at Korat, Thailand.

Back at Hong Non, PAVN mortars and a pair of 105mm howitzers began firing from the mountains to the northeast. By noon, Vietnamese troops penetrated the perimeter, engaging the Hmong defenders with small-arms and grenades. At 1500 hours, with the village aflame, the entire area was in communist hands.

Next, the communists divided their attention between Houei Sa An and Hua Moung, the RLG's substitute administrative centre for Sam Neua Province. Both were high on the communist hit list because they overlooked Route 6, which was handling an increased share of supplies destined for Pathet Lao and PAVN troops on the PDJ.

Of these, the first to fall was Houei Sa An on 9 February, sending the resident 1st SGU Battalion into the bush. Before Hua Moung suffered a similar fate, Vang Pao feverishly worked on a defensive strategy with two resident FAR battalion commanders. At the time, however, government forces were battling each other in Vientiane during a pair of consecutive coup attempts. As a result, the two Hua Moung battalion commanders were fixated on the capital at a most inopportune time. Realising a proper defence was futile, Vang Pao on 13 February flew to the site to help coordinate the evacuation of 8,000 dependents.

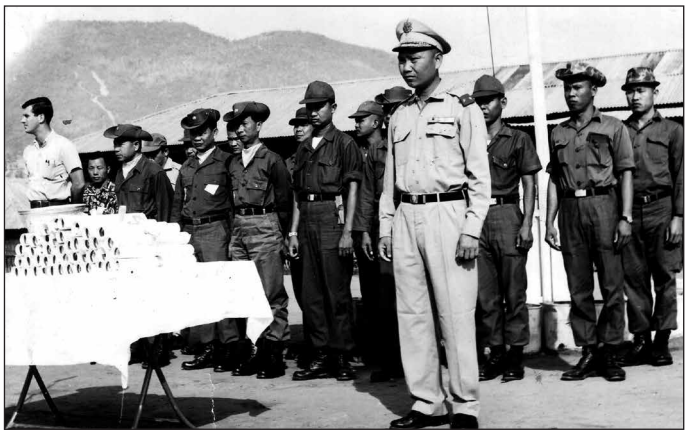
Throughout that day, a dozen Air America choppers and aircraft shuttled the civilians to the village of Nakhang, 30 kilometres to the southwest. By nightfall, with 1,000 persons still camped at the Hua Moung runway pending evacuation, communist forces unleashed mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. FAR soldiers and civilians streamed south from the garrison across the Xieng Khouang provincial border.

On the receiving end of the Hua Moung exodus, Nakhang over the ensuing week was inundated with displaced civilians and troops. But while Nakhang appeared to be the next likely communist target, the PAVN steamroller apparently ran out of steam. Nakhang, as a result, became the new RLG launchpad for operations into Sam Neua Province.

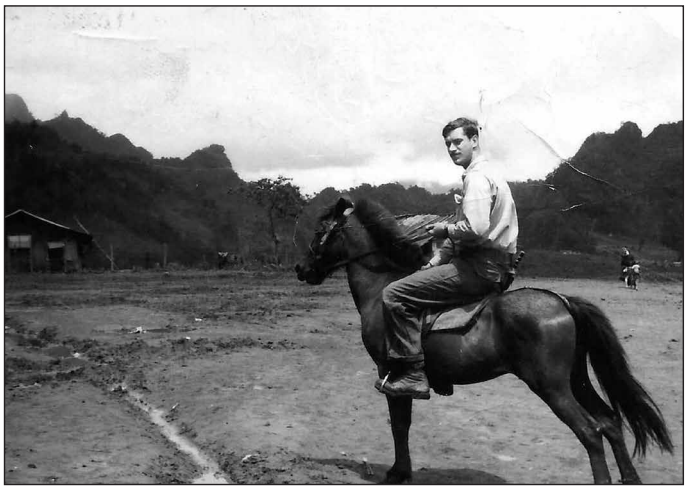
By the close of February 1965, two important changes took place. First, Vang Pao was promoted to MR 2 commander. Second, the CIA had opened the spigot to advisors in the region. One new arrival was, Mike Lynch, 26, who had been dispatched to Long Tieng the previous year to act as backup in the event either Vint Lawrence or Poe fell ill; both he and a fully recovered Poe now made Nakhang their home. Another new arrival was air operations specialist Jack Cahill. Overseeing them all was a Boston University graduate

PARU instructors for the first command and staff course at Long Tieng, mid-1965. Ten RTA instructors were also sent for the 32-week course, which was intended to groom guerrilla officers. It was attended by 27 Hmong, plus three Lao from the MR 4 guerrilla program. (Author's collection)

U.S. Ambassador William Sullivan and Brigadier General Vang Pao walk past a Hmong honour guard at Long Tieng, 1965. (Author's collection)



Brigadier General Vang Pao and PARU instructors preside over the award of graduation certificates for the first communications course at Long Tieng, 1966. Long Tieng Unit Chief Jon Randall is on the far left. (Author's collection)



Long Tieng Unit Chief Jon Randall atop his finnicky steed Bak Chorng, 1967. (Photo courtesy Jane Randall)

named Jonathan Randall, who replaced Lawrence as the unit chief at Long Tieng.

The CIA officers were supported by two PARU detachments: Team Z at Long Tieng and an augmented 17-man unit at Nakhang. In addition, 10 RTA officers came to Long Tieng in mid-year to begin a 32-week command and staff school intended to groom guerrilla officers.

Waiting until early July, Vang Pao launched his rainy season offensive. This would become an annual event, with government forces – especially guerrilla units – taking advantage of aerial transport and resupply to surge forward. Conversely, the communist forces, with their logistics mired in the mud, retreated.

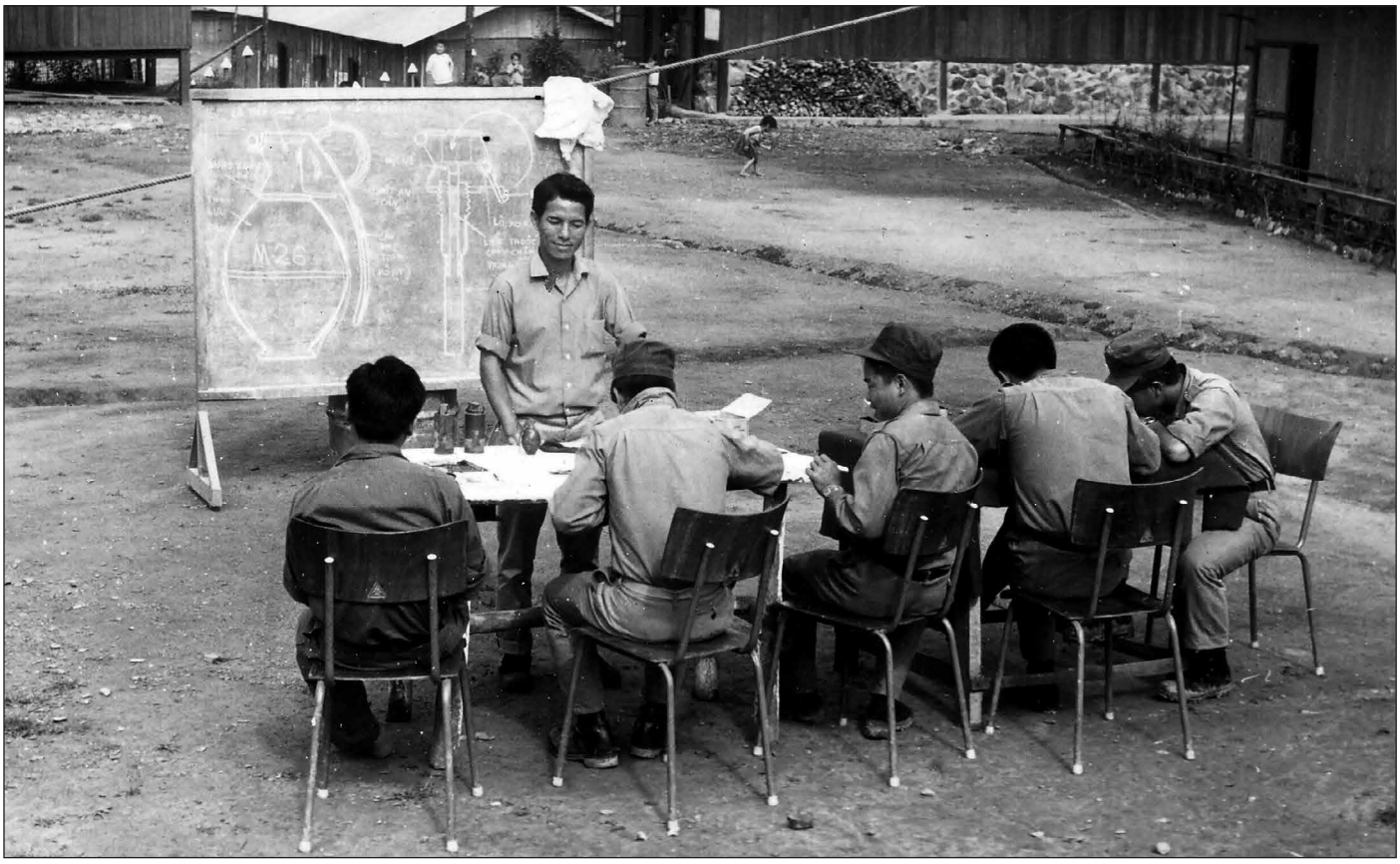
Staging points for the 1965 campaign were the two major RLG outposts along the Sam Neua-Xieng Khouang border, Nakhang and Houei Thom. At Nakhang were three FAR battalions and the 1st SGU Battalion. At Houei Thom were two FAR battalions, augmented in early July by a PARU-manned 105mm howitzer (three 105mm howitzers were delivered that summer to Vang Pao, but Hmong crews had not yet been trained to operate this weapon).

With Hua Moung as their goal, the five FAR battalions, supported by generous artillery and air support, marched northeast. Since the bulk of PAVN's 174th Regiment had already departed for North Vietnam the previous month, the Lao column by 22 July had covered half the distance to their target. Coming across two PAVN companies dug into a mountain, the PARU-manned howitzer was brought into play. When the tenacious Vietnamese defenders refused to flinch, RLAF T-28s and USAF jets were called in and reduced the mountain to a moonscape.

By August 5, the government column had advanced to the next PAVN-held mountain. For a week, they used a similar mix of artillery shells and aerial bombardment to pound the entrenched Vietnamese into oblivion. With the 1st and 2nd SGU Battalions occupying the liberated territory, Vang Pao on 25 August manoeuvred FAR soldiers against Hua Moung. After weeks of pounding, on 16 September the first Air America H-34 was able to land inside the deserted village. The PAVN defenders, it was discovered, had already withdrawn northeast.

After the retaking of Hua Moung, the two SGU battalions joined eight ADC companies for a sweep south from Nakhang. Operating against a pair each of Pathet Lao and PAVN battalions, the guerrillas by 21 October were able to push into Houei Sa An, capturing 55 tons of stockpiled communist foodstuffs and another two tons of ammunition. By month's end, SGU elements were rotated back to Long Tieng for rest while FAR troops were left to consolidate the RLG grip over their new real estate.

During this campaign, Air America had provided invaluable airlift support. The other contract airliner, Bird & Sons, on 28 August had come under new management and was renamed Continental Air Services, Inc. (CASI), a wholly owned subsidiary of Continental Airlines. Inheriting 22 ex-Bird planes, CASI quickly added to their inventory. In early November, they even decided to add – albeit briefly – C-130E transports to their roster.



A PARU commando gives instruction in the M26 fragmentation grenade to Hmong guerrilla officers at Long Tieng, 1965. (Author's collection)

Bill Young, the polyglot son of Christian missionaries along the Thai-Burmese border, was an early Momentum advisor hired primarily for his linguistic skills. (Photo courtesy Sanit Nakajitti)

As the CASI C-130s arrived in-theatre, Vang Pao braced himself for an imminent communist dry season offensive. To avoid the heavy losses of the previous dry season, the general and his CIA advisors scrambled to add depth to RLG defences at Hua Moung and Nakhang by erecting a forward ADC screening force. Plans were also penned to raise two more SGU battalions for use in Sam Neua. Then, with one eye on the calendar and another on the clouds, they hunkered down to await PAVN's next move.

Operations in the Northwest

Concurrent with paramilitary operations in the northeast, a parallel CIA effort saw a guerrilla net being erected across Sayaboury and southern Luang Prabang provinces – some of the same territory covered by the thin ADC network established by PARU in the final months before the 1962 Geneva accords. A key proponent of paramilitary operations in this sector was the Royal Thai Government (RTG), which was keen on building an anti-communist screen along its common land border with Sayaboury – especially after a barrage of anti-Thai radio propaganda by Peking beginning in January 1965 sparked fears in Bangkok that northwestern Laos would be used as a supply conduit for Chinese-sponsored Thai insurgents.

To help mould ADC forces in this zone, the RTSF in February 1965 deployed its first two teams to northern Laos. The first entered the mountains straddling the Uttradit-Sayaboury border and began training two Lao Theung ADC companies. The second was dispatched to the same vicinity to initiate training for three Hmong ADC companies.

In addition to the Thai special forces, CIA officer Terry Burke, who had been shifting between Nakhon Phanom and Long Tieng

as a substitute case officer since June 1963, was dispatched to open a camp near the Lao border town of Xieng Lom. There he was joined by an RTA liaison team, which helped erect a small logistical base and headquarters shack.

Xieng Lom, Burke quickly found, was beset by problems. Their biggest headache was from the top FAR commander, General Ouane Rathikoun, who wanted control over the Hmong ADC to help with the opium harvest.

Lunch at Xieng Lom, spring 1965. Seated around the table are Pat Landry, Ed Johnson, Terry Burke, and Louis Ojibway. The three had come to visit Burke after construction of a headquarters building and warehouse at Xieng Lom. Johnson and Ojibway would later die in an H-34 crash in August 1965 after visiting Nam Yu. (Photo courtesy Terry Burke)

Attempting to bypass the interference from Ouane, another case officer, a former Special Forces NCO named Howard Freeman, moved into Luang Prabang Province to set up a new camp near the village of Boum Lao. He was soon joined by both RTSF teams previously operating in Sayaboury.

Looking to transform Boum Lao into the anchor of a local Hmong-Lao Theung ADC net, Freeman in early May 1965 began ADC recruitment and supervised construction of a STOL runway. This build-up at Boum Lao, however, did not go unnoticed by communist forces. By mid-month, two companies of the Pathet Lao 408th Battalion, with attached PAVN advisors, moved toward the camp.

At 0500 on 21 May, both these companies rushed Boum Lao from the south. Present at the time was case officer Burke, temporarily filling in for Freeman. Grabbing a box of money and documents, he led a small escape party into the jungle.

At noon, a Bird & Sons Pilatus Porter arrived over Boum Lao. The pilot, Ernest Brace, not having heard radio warnings that the camp had fallen, vectored into the site's airfield. As the Porter came to a halt, communist troops jumped from the jungle and sprayed the plane with gunfire. Of the passengers, one FAR sergeant was killed instantly and his wife wounded. Brace and an RTSF radioman were led away at gunpoint.

South of Boum Lao, a pair of Air America H-34s eventually located Burke's escape party and lifted the survivors back to Xieng Lom. Brace and the Thai radioman, however, would end up in a Hanoi prison for the duration of the war.

Farther west, the CIA had tried to extend its reach into the ethnically diverse province of Houa Khong. Opening Houa Khong guerrilla operations in the late spring of 1962 was PARU Team I. Garrisoned at Chiang Khong, the Thai town across the Mekong from Ban Houei Sai, the Thai police commandos were joined by CIA case officer William Young. Looking to recruit an indigenous cadre, Young, who was fluent in the Shan language due to his missionary upbringing, drew 15 of these tribesmen into the CIA fold. Because many Shan also spoke English well (owing to their contact with missionaries), they became a natural choice for radio operators and team leaders. Their thin population on the Lao side of the border, however, ultimately made them unsuitable for manning larger formations.

For ADC, Young turned his attention toward the Khmu tribe, comprising a larger slice of the population in northwestern Laos. By mid-1962, he had made contact with chieftain Khamsene Keodara, formerly with the French Union Army. Enticing Khamsene to begin recruiting a Khmu ADC, Young at the same time selected seven Khmu students and dispatched them to Hua Hin for basic radio training.

Before more inroads could be made, the Geneva accords went into effect during October 1962. Forbidden from operating inside Laos, Young retained the seven trained Khmu radio operators at Chiang Khong. Then in December, he briefly crossed the Mekong to exfiltrate five more Khmu and two Lu students and dispatch them to Phitscamp for radio and leadership training.

By the summer of 1963, President Kennedy's decision to hike pressure against the Pathet Lao prompted the CIA to revive its Houa Khong operation. First, a contingent of Mien tribesmen was secretly sent from Houa Khong to Phitscamp for radio and leadership instruction. Second, Louis Ojibway was transferred to Chiang Khong to oversee the fledgling Houa Khong program. A full-blooded American Indian, Ojibway had been an all-American tackle and Golden Gloves champion during college. As a lieutenant at the onset of the Second World War, he and Sergeant Joe "The Brown Bomber" Louis had together coached the Fort Riley boxing team.

By the second half of 1964, Ojibway opened a new training centre on the outskirts of Chiang Khong. Known as Kai Kong – Thai for "Middle Base" – the camp, cadred by a PARU team, began courses in leadership, rudimentary spycraft for intelligence-gathering teams, and radio communications.

Just as work on Kai Kong was completed, the 4802nd JLD authorised Ojibway to send one of his newly arrived officers, Gary Erb, across the Mekong to survey options for a forward operation base inside Houa Khong. By the end of 1964, they settled on a remote cornfield at a place called Nam Yu. Clearing a clay STOL runway in the centre of the Nam Yu valley, Ojibway (who continued spending most of his time with the PARU team at Kai Kong) assigned Erb (who handled intelligence-gathering) and Jim Sheldon (heading paramilitary activities) to this forward site. They were soon joined by a dozen Thai radio instructors, both PARU and RTA.

Immediately, recruitment of local minorities began. As this activity ramped up in the spring of 1965, the advisors at Nam Yu were directed to make the switch from ADC militia operations to more ambitious SGU activity. By June, Sheldon had assembled 428 men; in keeping with the ethnically diverse nature of the region, this number was divided into one company each of Mien, Khmu, Hmong, and Lu troops. Command of the composite unit was given to Captain Vee Sihabout, a lowland Lao seconded by the FAR.

Because neither Nam Yu, Kai Kong, nor Phitscamp had the facilities to handle training for a complete battalion, Nam Yu's 1st SGU Battalion in July was flown down to Hua Hin for instruction.

Mike Deuel, the architect of Project Hardnose in MR 4. Deuel and his replacement, Mike Maloney, perished in a helicopter crash near Saravane in October 1965. (Photo courtesy Fred Bloom via James Morrison)

In 1966, the 4802nd JLD moved from the former civil aviation building to these new, more spacious structures adjacent to the Air America ramp at Udorn RTAFB. (Author's collection)

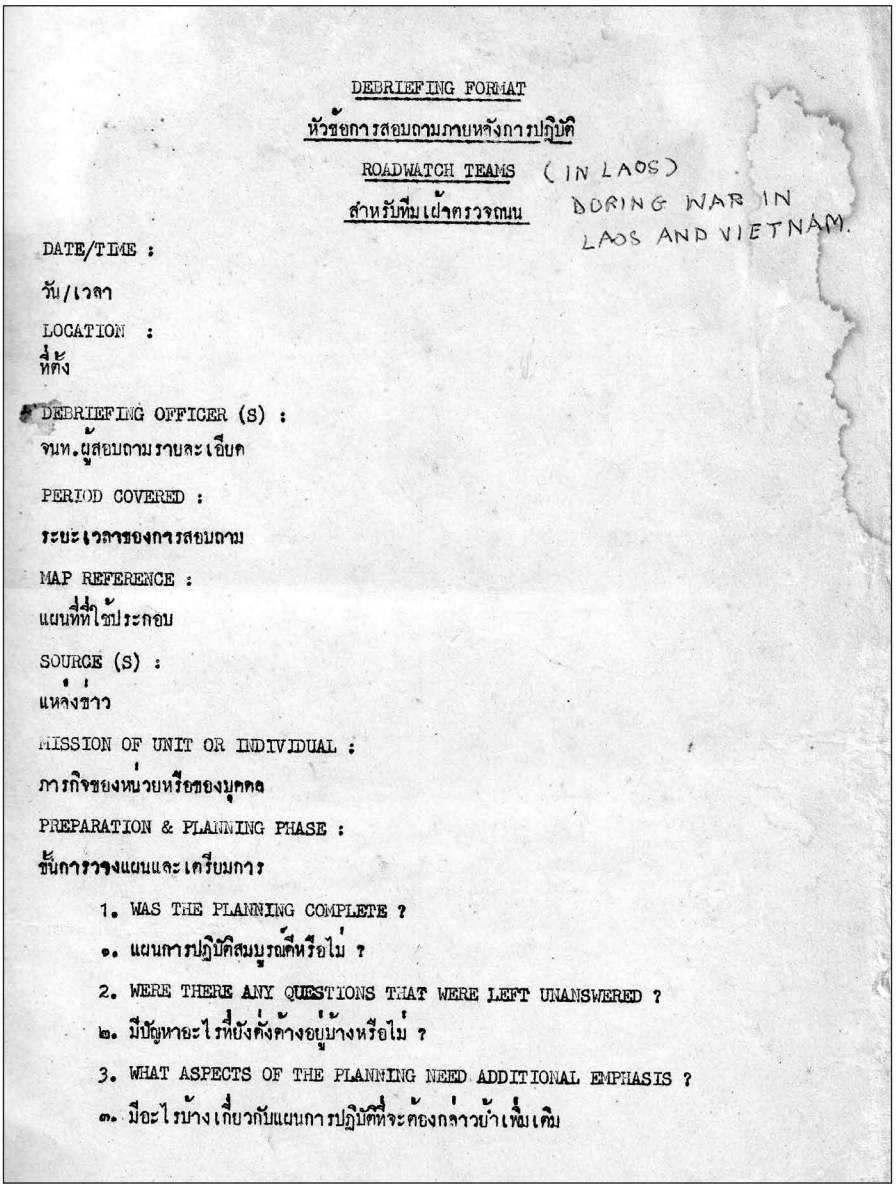
Training started immediately, with a steady stream of MR 1 hill tribe leaders venturing down to the Thai seaside camp to keep tabs on the progress of their nascent battalion.

With the battalion still a month from graduation, a tragic setback befell the northwestern guerrilla program. On the afternoon of 20 August 1965, Ojibway boarded an Air America H-34 at Nam Yu bound for Udorn. Joining him was Ed Johnson, an Udorn-based CIA officer who had come to Nam Yu to discuss a wiretapping operation with Erb.

Flying in a storm with a broken wiper, the chopper crew attempted to follow the Mekong toward Thailand. Dipping too low, they hit the river. Both case officers drowned in the wreck, making them the first two CIA officers to die in Laos. (During the next monsoon season, Ojibway's house at Chiang Khong was swept away by the Mekong with no damage to surrounding structures; the locals were convinced that Ojibway's spirit had come to reclaim his residence.)

Despite the chopper crash, Nam Yu's guerrilla program managed to stay on schedule. Replacing Ojibway was MR 2 veteran Tony Poe, who left the PARU trainers at Kai Kong and moved permanently into Nam Yu. Meantime, Nam Yu's 1st SGU Battalion graduated from Hua Hin and was flown back to Laos. For its first operation, the unit was sent northeast toward the Lao Theung village of Vien Pou Kha. Since aerial resupply was at a premium, dozens of mules were purchased from Nationalist Chinese drug smugglers along the border; with these pack animals keeping the guerrillas supplied, the battalion took its target.

Despite this promising start, Nam Yu's first experiment in battalion-sized operations would prove short-lived. Within three months, ethnic fissures within the segregated unit widened; this being too much for Captain Vee to contain, the battalion was dissolved and Nam Yu, for the time, refocused attention on smaller, more manageable team operations.



DEBRIEFING FORMAT

หัวข้อการสอบถามภายหลังการปฏิบัติ

ROADWATCH TEAMS (IN LAOS)

สำหรับทีมเฝ้าตรวจถนน DURING WAR IN LAOS AND VIETNAM.

DATE/TIME :

วัน/เวลา

LOCATION :

ที่ตั้ง

DEBRIEFING OFFICER (S) :

จนท.ผู้สอบถามรายละเอียด

PERIOD COVERED :

ระยะเวลาของการสอบถาม

MAP REFERENCE :

แผนที่ที่ใช้ประกอบ

SOURCE (S) :

แหล่งข่าว

MISSION OF UNIT OR INDIVIDUAL :

ภารกิจของหน่วยหรือของบุคคล

PREPARATION & PLANNING PHASE :

ขั้นการวางแผนและเตรียมการ

1. WAS THE PLANNING COMPLETE ?

๑. แผนการปฏิบัติสมบูรณ์ดีหรือไม่ ?

2. WERE THERE ANY QUESTIONS THAT WERE LEFT UNANSWERED ?

๒. มีปัญหาอะไรที่ยังตั้งค้างอยู่บ้างหรือไม่ ?

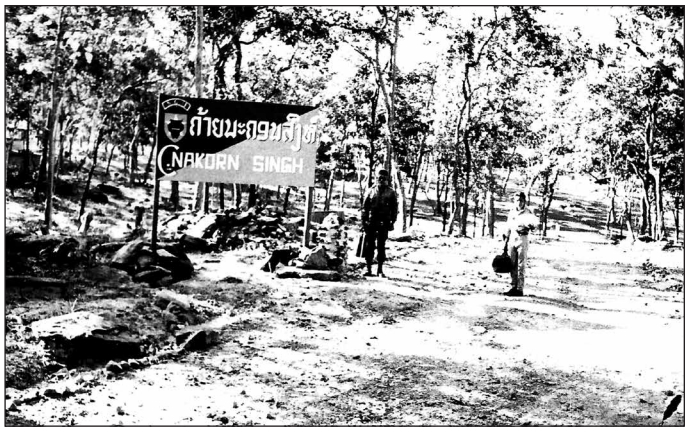
3. WHAT ASPECTS OF THE PLANNING NEED ADDITIONAL EMPHASIS ?

๓. มีอะไรบ้างเกี่ยวกับแผนการปฏิบัติที่จะต้องกล่าวย้ำเพิ่มเติม

Debriefing checklist used by Savannakhet Unit for road-watch teams, 1966. (Author's collection)

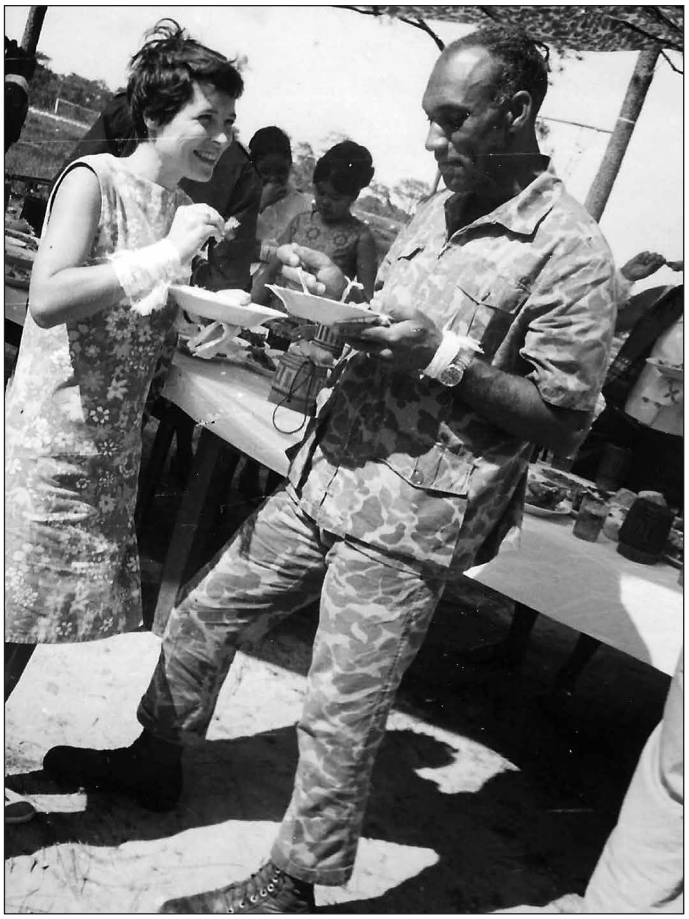
Watching the Trail

In October 1965, tragedy again struck the CIA in Laos. To that time, the Hardnose program in MR 4 had been pioneered by Mike Deuel. Three years in-theatre, Deuel was scheduled for replacement by Michael Maloney, a young paramilitary advisor fresh to the kingdom. To

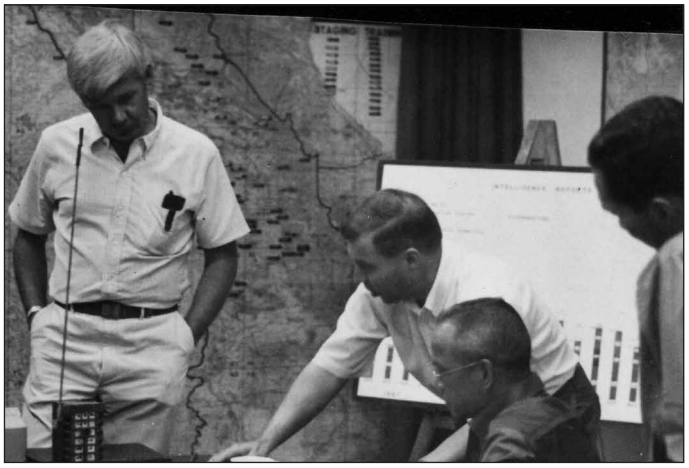


The entrance to Camp Nakorn Singh, more commonly known as PS 18, 1968. Note that the insignia of the South Vietnamese Rangers has been appropriated by the MR 4 SGU. (Photo courtesy James Dunn)

General Phasouk and Lt. Colonel Khamphat Boua belt out a tune at a SGU graduation party at PS 18, June 1969. Note the South Vietnamese Ranger insignia on the wall, appropriated by the MR 4 SGU. (Photo courtesy James Dunn)



Wilbur "Black Lion" Greene during a celebration in Pakse, 1969. A former U.S. Army Special Forces captain, Greene arrived in Laos in December 1966 and was assigned to PS 22. He spent the next three years with MR 4 SGUs before transferring to Long Tieng. (Photo courtesy James Dunn)



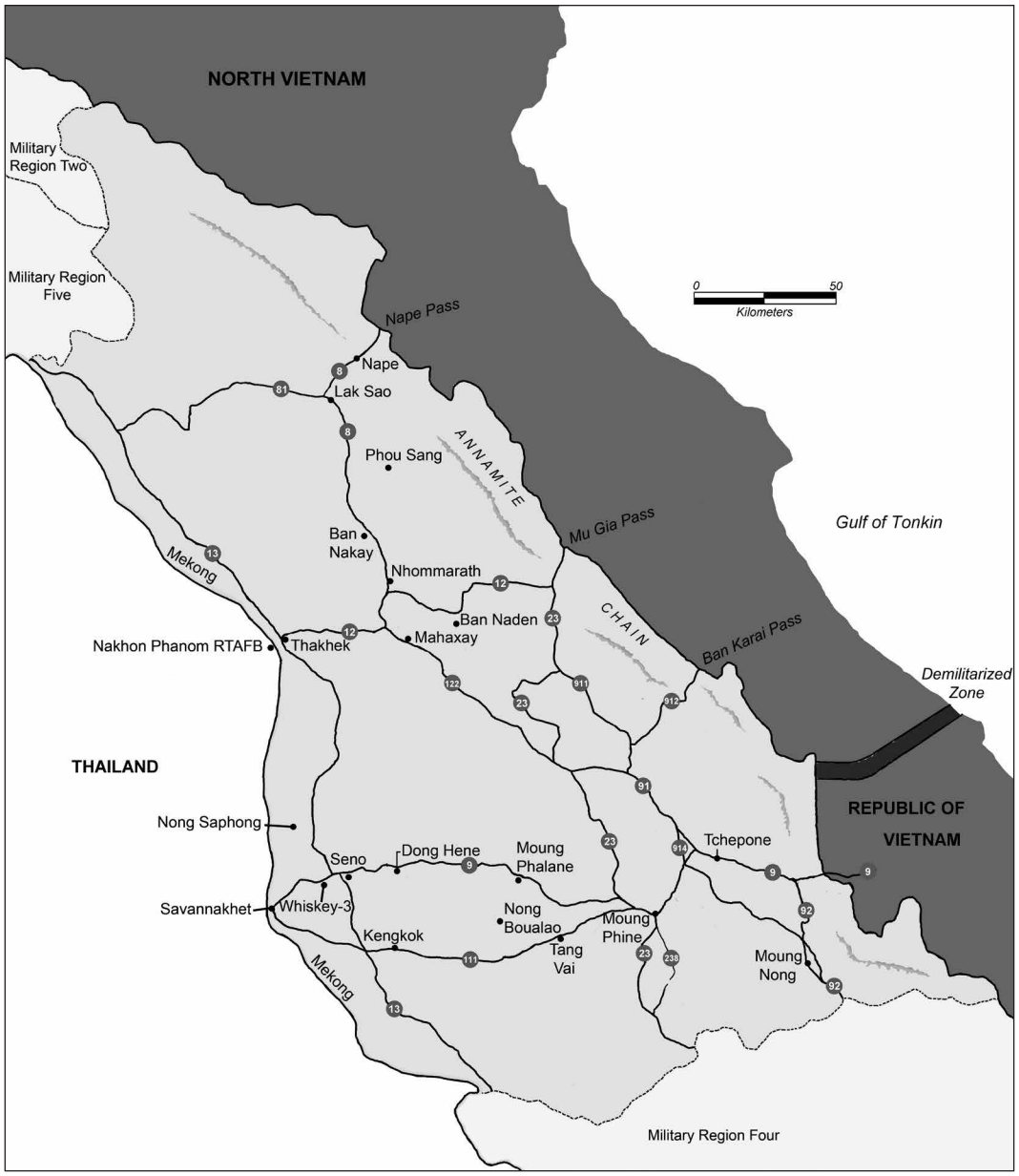
Hark Case officer Gene Norwinski (left) and Savannakhet Unit Chief Dick Cornish discuss road-watch operations. On the table is a Hark-1 radio. (Photo courtesy Gene Norwinski)

familiarise Maloney with MR 4's forward road-watching sites, on 11 October Deuel took him on a payroll visit to Saravane.

Following distribution of funds, both case officers boarded an Air America H-34 to tour frontline outposts to the northeast. After covering 24 kilometres, however, the chopper suffered an engine failure and plummeted into the jungle. With two more case officers missing just two months after the loss of Ojibway and Johnson, the CIA launched an immediate search. After two days of aerial patrols, the wreck was spotted. Eight Thai commandos were subsequently parachuted into the jungle to recover the corpses.

Despite these losses, Hardnose began expanding within weeks after the fatal crash. By late October, a 21-man RTSF training detachment, named Team 999, was posted to a newly established training camp 27 kilometres southeast of Houei Kong and just three kilometres from the edge of the Bolovens escarpment. Named Pakse Site 22 (PS 22), this rudimentary base, overseen by a single CIA officer, was dedicated to road-watch training.

In MR 3, meantime, there was a similar requirement for an in-country training and road-watch launch site. This led to the creation in late 1965 of an isolated jungle camp 26 kilometres northeast of Savannakhet. The new site was named Siberia Training Camp



Military Region 3. (Author's map)

– Siberia being the same name given to the earlier PARU base in Khammouane Province – but was more popularly referred to as Whiskey-3.

Immediately after its establishment, Whiskey-3 received a contingent from the RTSF. This Special Forces detachment served two functions. First, it provided a modicum of training to the region's Hardnose teams. Second, it initiated a unilateral Thai road-watch operation named Star. As conceived by Headquarters 333, Star involved four (later 10) six-man RTSF teams launching from Whiskey-3 toward the Trail, primarily in the vicinity of Mu Gia.

By February 1966, both Hardnose and Star road-watch teams received a boost with the arrival of three USAF CH-3C helicopters to Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. Callsigned Pony Express, the three unarmed aircraft, devoid of national markings, were immediately dedicated to covert operations in Laos and North Vietnam. The CIA's Savannakhet Unit, frustrated over a spate of sour dealings with Air America, used Pony Express exclusively for the next six months to insert its teams along the eastern panhandle.

Through the second half of 1966, road-watching in MR 3 prospered. Central to the program was Whiskey-3, which soon grew to include a firing range, warehouse, two small classrooms, a helicopter landing zone, and 37 native huts. For most missions, Star and Hardnose road-watchers shuttled from Whiskey-3 to the CIA's isolation compound at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, where they boarded Pony Express – which in June was increased by 11 more ships – for infiltration.

Despite steady growth with Hardnose, the push was on for an enhanced successor that would, among other things, overcome language problems that dogged the trail-watching effort. One way to sidestep the language problem was to use Thai road-watchers who were fluent in English. In the fall of 1966, the 4802nd JLD attempted just that by forming a 50-man Thai contingent for use in MR 4. Unlike the Star teams in MR 3, this new Thai detachment was directly advised by a CIA case officer. Getting the job was Tom Hewitt, a graduate of the Merchant Marine Academy with prior experience running agents into Cuba.

On paper, Hewitt's detachment looked impressive. Recruited from the PARU, RTSF, and Royal Thai Marine Corps, they were given 30 days of training at Phitscamp. Because the Thai were very concerned about any media exposure in Laos, in late 1966 they were sent to a small camp 36 kilometres northwest of Pakse on the Mekong named Nakorn Singh, but more commonly known as PS 18.

Once at PS 18, the Thai were broken into smaller teams for chopper insertion near the Trail. Very quickly, however, the program proved a disappointment. With the Thai showing little stomach for actually getting on the Trail, the program was cancelled after just three months.

With the Thai solution falling short, the CIA's Technical Services Division at the opening of 1967 proposed bypassing the trail-watchers with an automated road counter. Their prototype consisted of a magnetic sensor to be buried under a trail and connected by a cable to a sealed canister containing a power source and a transmitter. When an aircraft flew overhead, it could "interrogate" the counter and get the traffic tallies.

To test the device, a single machine was delivered to MR 4. Tom Hewitt, who remained in MR 4 to run Lao road-watch teams and singleton agents, found the device to be highly temperamental during two trial placements.

As frustration mounted over its magnetic road counter, the Technical Services Division answered with a new gadget: a highly

modified U.S. Air Force survival radio dubbed the Hark-I. The front of the radio featured buttons with silhouettes of vehicles and PAVN soldiers. An indigenous team member had merely to press the picture-button the number of times he saw a particular type of vehicle or soldier travel down the Trail; other buttons corresponded to time and location. A final button on the side of the transceiver would then be pushed, transmitting in burst form the tally to an orbiting Air America plane. In this way, a road-watch team could relay intelligence to overflying aircraft without having to use English.

With this new radio in hand, the successor to Hardnose – named Hark – quickly took shape.

In general, the Hark program bred a group of reconnaissance teams that were stealthier than their Hardnose predecessors. This was necessary because – unlike the early days, when a team could infiltrate literally to the road's edge – the Trail was rapidly becoming a haven of PAVN ground patrols, often accompanied by tracker dogs. In the spring of 1966, for example, four teams in MR 3 – including one in place for only two days – had been intercepted over the course of just two weeks; of them, one disappeared without a trace, another had but a single survivor.

By mid-1968, Hark was reaching its peak. In MR 3, as many as 25 teams were being run in each of three sectors. In MR 4, meantime, the PS 18 training site (which had grown to include three barracks sufficient to hold 500 students) was churning out Hark members who passed a 10-week road-watch course.

Problems, however, were coming to the fore. First, Hark was encountering major competition from the Pentagon's own anti-infiltration program that combined border defences in South Vietnam and an air-dropped sensor/munitions barrier spread along the Lao corridor. Begun in earnest during the fall of 1967, the sensor portion of the project aimed to paint a real-time picture of PAVN traffic down the panhandle. By 1968, sensor strings covered 17 locations in the central sector of MR 3, compared with only 11 road-watch observation points.

Even more damning for Hark was the fact that the USAF had reached a truck-kill plateau. Over the course of 1967, truck sightings were up some 165 percent over the previous year – thanks to both Hark road-watchers and USAF sensors – yet the number of trucks killed by aerial interdiction remained roughly the same. In short, this meant that there already were far more vehicles on the Trail than U.S. airpower could destroy. Hark's data on traffic pattern flows, then, was largely irrelevant.

But the real death blow to Hark was delivered with the advent of advanced aerial gunships like the AC-130 in February 1968, which carried a full array of sensors and night-vision devices that enabled them to identify their own truck targets without the need to consult with the CIA or air-dropped sensors. With Hark's data in shrinking demand, the CIA in the summer of 1969 looked to transfer the project from its books to USAF funding. The Air Force, unwilling to pay for redundant intelligence, refused. Hark, as a result, sputtered toward an inevitable budgetary death.

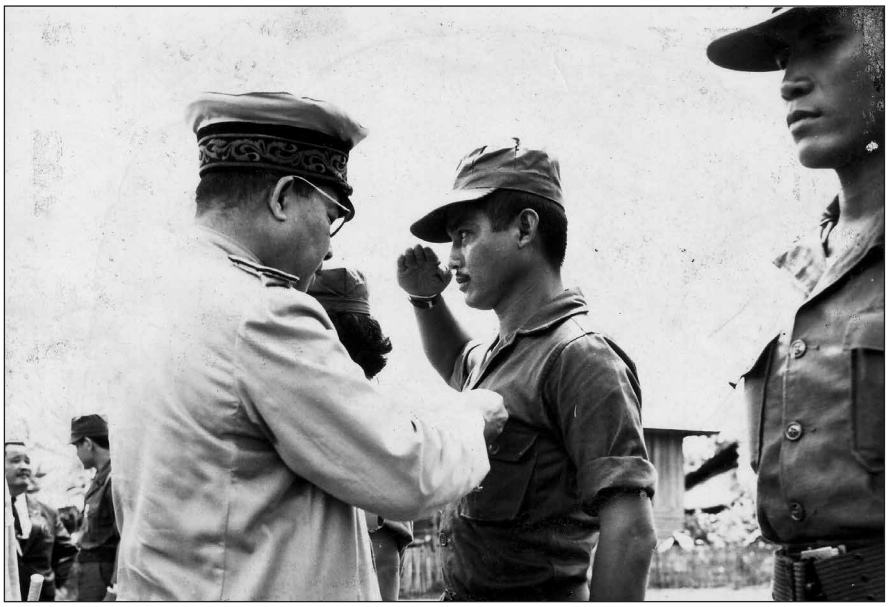
3
LOW BOIL

During the opening of 1966, with the King of Laos set to visit Long Tieng on 16 January to celebrate the Hmong New Year, Vang Pao was determined to avoid another dry season setback by better positioning himself to counter the expected North Vietnamese surge.

Key to the general's preparations was a defensive line running from his southern stronghold at Nakhang to a new northern anchor at Houei Kah Moun, a former Momentum base eight kilometres north of Phou Phathi, which Tony Poe had helped secure in October 1965 before his reassignment to Nam Yu.

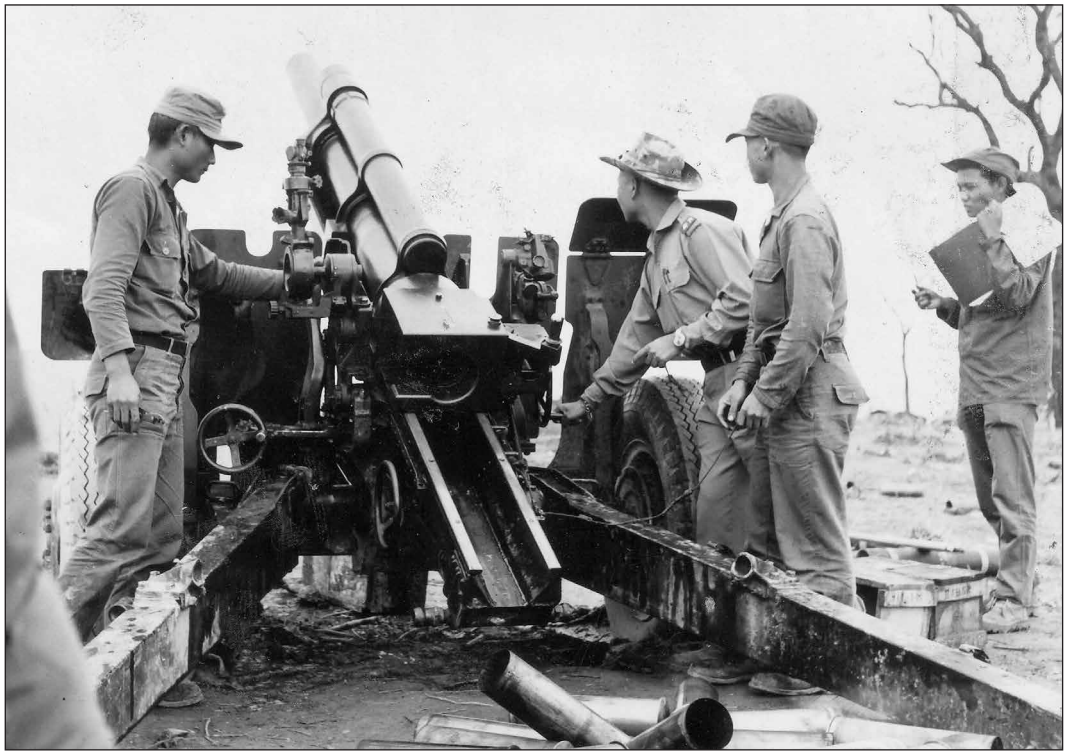
To bolster Vang Pao's hand, the CIA authorised the general in January to begin building what would be his fifth SGU formation. Drawn from the best ADC militiamen in the Moung Moc region at the top of the Lao panhandle, 5th SGU Battalion became the first unit to enter the gates of a new MR 2 SGU training camp at Moung Cha. Staffed by instructors seconded from the RTA, Moung Cha by the end of January began a 14-week training cycle for the Moung Moc SGU trainees.

As predicted, North Vietnamese troops in the opening days of February 1966 began the latest communist dry season offensive. Once again spearheading the drive was the 148th Regiment, which had been quietly roaming Sam Neua Province since the previous November. Initially, the regiment probed along a number of fronts, throwing small task forces against a trio of guerrilla outposts. In all three cases, Vang Pao's irregulars proved cooperative, withdrawing early and avoiding the heavy personnel losses of the previous year.



King Sisavang Vatthana awards Lao parachute wings to PARU commandos during a visit to Long Tieng, January 1966. Visible on the far left is Hmong political leader Touby Lyfoung. (Author's collection)

Brigadier General Vang Pao preparing 105mm artillery shells for the defence of Nakhang, 1966. (Author's collection)



Brigadier General Vang Pao fires off 105mm rounds at Nakhang, 1966. (Author's collection)

The North Vietnamese next shifted their sights to Houei Thom, which had eluded their capture in 1965 primarily because of strong allied air support. At 0200 hours on 6 February, the first PAVN assault hit the Houei Thom perimeter. Defending until their ammunition was depleted, the garrison escaped during the pre-dawn hours toward Nakhang.

At sunrise, CIA case officer Jerrold "Hog" Daniels – an ex-smoke jumper recently assigned to Nakhang – buzzed smouldering Houei Thom in a Porter. Unlike during the previous year, the camp had fallen too quickly for air support to be employed; still, many Vietnamese bodies lay strewn across the perimeter. Veering toward the hills to the southwest, Daniels located the fleeing government column; Air America H-34s subsequently backloaded the ragged survivors to Nakhang.

On their heels, PAVN approached Nakhang on 8 February. Although Vang Pao judged the situation to be critical, his repeated requests for reinforcements were met by silence from the FAR General Staff in Vientiane. As the civilian population abandoned the base, PAVN waited until the morning of 17 February to launch a concerted assault. Although the defenders were offering stiff resistance, Ambassador William Sullivan ordered all U.S. advisors to evacuate during the evening hours.

By 0900 hours the next morning, two CIA officers – Hog Daniels and Mike Lynch – plus a USAF combat controller, were all on site. Soon afterward, PAVN renewed its assault. Desperate, the advisors sent a plea to the ambassador for the use of napalm. Sullivan agreed, allowing USAF jets for the first time to use the controversial jellied gasoline in northern Laos. Although sporadic mortar fire continued, the airstrikes by late morning had broken the back of the Vietnamese attack.

As the battle began to favour the defenders, Vang Pao arrived at noon to personally command the operation from the airfield. As an Air America H-34 approached to land, a North Vietnamese sniper hit Vang Pao. Grabbing the wounded general, those on the airfield escorted him to the far side of the garrison, behind the safety of a low-lying hill. There an H-34 lifted Vang Pao to an adjacent base where he was transferred to a C-123 and rushed to Thailand.

That night, all U.S. advisors were again ordered to vacate Nakhang during the evening hours. With Vang Pao wounded, morale at the garrison was at rock bottom. This, combined with a PAVN mortar barrage that ignited the ammunition dump beside the runway, started a slow haemorrhage of troops.

To save the base, an urgent appeal was forwarded to the USAF to dispatch – for the first time in northern Laos – AC-47 gunships. Immediately approving the request, the Air Force rushed two planes from Udorn. By the time the first arrived, it was too late: Nakhang had been abandoned to PAVN.

For the North Vietnamese, Nakhang was a Pyrrhic victory. U.S. jet fighters had mauled their ranks, then levelled the village,

leaving little left to exploit. So devastated were the PAVN attackers – civilian sources reported hundreds of casualties being carried from the battleground – that it was not until mid-March before they could occupy the location.

During April, a reinvigorated General Vang Pao, his arm still in a sling, returned to Long Tieng after several weeks of medical treatment in Thailand and Hawaii. Settling in his headquarters, Vang Pao wasted no time before launching his 1966 rainy season offensive. In contrast to the previous year, however, the general's manoeuvre forces this time were not dominated by FAR troops, but rather by SGU and ADC irregulars. This was due to a combination of factors: attrition in MR 2's FAR battalions, an unwillingness on the part of FAR commanders outside the region to lend their men to MR 2, and Vang Pao's own increased confidence in the abilities of his rapidly growing guerrilla forces.

Long Tieng Unit Chief Jon Randall (left) with U.S. Army and CIA technicians as they explain use of a 5-inch high-velocity aircraft rocket as a harassment weapon. (Photo courtesy Jane Randall)

To begin the campaign, Hmong guerrillas during the first week of May moved unopposed into two former Momentum camps due north of the PDJ inside Luang Prabang Province. Next, the irregulars leapfrogged 28 kilometres northeast to Moung Hiem. From Moung Hiem, the Hmong divided, one column heading straight north for Moung Son, which had been abandoned earlier in the spring, and a second walking southeast toward Nakhang.

Moung Son was taken without resistance. Nakhang was a different story. There Vietnamese troops were spread thick, with apparently every intention of making the RLG pay for the site in blood. Obliging them, U.S. planes pounded the site for two straight days. As the airstrikes took effect, Hmong guerrillas at Moung Hiem were loaded aboard Air America H-34s and airlifted into the hills southeast of Nakhang.

By 23 May, Vang Pao's guerrillas were at the doorstep of Nakhang. PAVN was slowly giving ground, pulling back to either side of the runway. As airstrikes forced the bulk of the Vietnamese toward a distant treeline, a flight of jets arrived and annihilated the exposed PAVN troops. Two days later, Nakhang was declared a secure site. To defend the base, the 5th SGU Battalion, freshly graduated from Moung Cha, was flown in for garrison duty.

Halfway through the monsoon season, PAVN was still avoiding contact across much of MR 2. The upcoming dry season, however, carried the promise of a fresh communist surge. To better brace itself for an increase in North Vietnamese activity, the CIA took three measures. First, an additional case officer – Frank "Bag" Odom – was assigned to northern MR 2. Second, Thai road-watchers were introduced to MR 2. This program, which began on a trial basis in January 1966, attempted to skirt language problems by hiring Thai civilians fluent in English. Third, two new SGU formations were formed during the second half of the year. The first, the 6th SGU Battalion, was trained at Moung Cha from August to December, then airlifted to Nakhang to relieve the 5th SGU Battalion. The second SGU formation, named SGU Battalion 227, differed from the six earlier battalions in composition and mission. Instead of being offered instruction at Moung Cha, it was formed by uniting five ADC companies (in this case, from the zone northwest of the PDJ) with no additional training. And rather than being intended for offensive operations, this zone battalion was tasked strictly with local defence.

By the closing weeks of 1966, in keeping with the seasonal pattern of the conflict in Laos, a major PAVN build-up in Sam Neua was evident. Farther south in Xieng Khouang, a record 30 trucks a day were spotted moving west along Route 7 toward the PDJ. The war, turned up a notch in intensity, was set to enter 1967 by storm.

Year of the Guerrilla

By 1967, a turning point had been reached in Laos. Before that year, the Geneva accords upheld a fragile status quo that Ambassador Sullivan's embassy staff generally respected. For the CIA, this meant paramilitary operations had focused primarily on intelligence-gathering (except in MR 2), with a minimal number of up-country advisors and an effort to use, when possible, Thai instructors in lieu of Americans.

By 1967, however, the embassy's prior adherence toward measured actions was overtaken by Washington's demand to sharply escalate pressure on North Vietnam. Accordingly, the CIA's Vientiane Station – headed since July 1966 by one of the Agency's fast-rising officers, Ted Shackley – was given an expanded mandate. This translated into a fundamental shift in emphasis from intelligence-gathering to action operations (like raids and ambushes), which in turn sparked a proliferation of SGU battalions, and even regiments.

To handle this expanded mandate, a wave of paramilitary officers was steered to Laos. Rather than the young college graduates and

Hmong guerrillas with a 5-inch high-velocity aircraft rocket adapted by CIA technicians as a harassment weapon, 1966. (Author's collection)

smoke jumpers earlier favoured by Bill Lair, many of these new arrivals were former U.S. Marine and USSF officers and senior NCOs. They soon oversaw an upward spiral in paramilitary activity that reached every corner of the kingdom. Some of the most diverse unconventional operations took place in MR 1. There, RLG attention was focused around the Nambac valley, which, since its capture by FAR troops in August 1966 had been transformed into a major RLG bastion.

The Nambac valley was also slated as a springboard for regional guerrilla operations. To realise this latter role, the CIA's one-man Luang Prabang Unit, headed by an ex-U.S. Marine captain, was augmented in late 1966 by two paramilitary advisors. The first, Pat Sharone, was formerly a senior NCO in the 101st Airborne Division during the Second World War. The second, Chuck Campbell, was an ex-Marine. Relocating to the Nambac valley, the two began organising local hill tribes in northern Luang Prabang and southernmost Phongsaly provinces.

In short order, the two created a network named Forces Guerrilla/East (FG/E), signifying that it covered the eastern part of MR 1. This network was further sub-divided into 10 sub-sectors. As in the early Momentum days, the 10 sub-sectors were formed around pro-RLG village chieftains who organised their subjects into a home guard for local defence, intelligence collection, and the occasional action mission. Training was largely in the field, except for team leaders and radio operators who were sent to Phitscamp.

FG/E differed from Momentum in one key respect. Unlike Momentum, it lacked a unifying Vang Pao figure; that is, a single prominent field commander drawn from the hilltribe ranks. Instead, three Lao Theung sub-sector commanders were commissioned as FAR lieutenants and offered as pale counterparts to the Hmong general.

Concurrent with the creation of the FG/E sub-sectors, Luang Prabang Unit also dabbled in larger SGU formations. By the late spring of 1967, a Lao Theung SGU battalion had been recruited and dispatched to Hua Hin for training. Upon its return, battalion command was turned over to Captain Chaocharn Sayasanh. This proved a poor choice, for his troops soon blamed him for pocketing their payroll and refused to go on operations.

With the battalion falling apart, Chaocharn was replaced by Captain Phayloth Somphonphakdy, a Fort Benning graduate seconded from FAR, who set about regrouping the unit in the mountains north of Nambac.

Growth was also taking place inside the previously established guerrilla zone in northwestern MR 1. Now going by the name Forces Guerrilla/Northwest (FG/NW), this zone encompassed Houa Khong and westernmost Luang Prabang provinces. The FG/NW headquarters was at Nam Yu and consisted of four sub-sectors. Each of these sub-sectors had its own commander –usually a ranking tribal chieftain – who answered to the FG/NW commander at Nam Yu, who in turn was under Nam Yu's top CIA advisor, Tony Poe.

On paper, Poe's FG/NW was subordinate to Luang Prabang Unit; in reality, Poe's strong personality earned him considerable autonomy and a direct channel of communication to Udorn. Poe's strong personality was also reflected in his emphasis on action operations. By the end of 1966, FG/NW harassment had forced communist porters to stop using the road between Moung Sing and Nam Tha as a regular supply channel. With supplies thus constricted, a PAVN rallier in late 1966 revealed they planned little by way of offensive operations in western MR 1 during the upcoming dry season.

Encouraged by communist frustrations, Nam Yu continued with more of the same during the rainy season in mid-1967. Further success, in turn, led to growing enthusiasm for bolder action. Such thinking ultimately spawned plans for the largest FG/NW operation to that time: the retaking of Nam Tha, which had been lost by FAR in an embarrassing 1962 rout.

A main reason for targeting Nam Tha was grounded in refugee policy. Unlike MR 2, where an effort was made to keep families near their villages so as to maintain an up-country network of sympathisers, the prevailing philosophy in MR 1 was to remove families from the hinterland and resettle them closer to the Mekong valley. Another reason followed from Lao politics. Many of the families in Nam Tha were lowland Lao, including several connected to the RLG hierarchy. These influential Lao officials made it no secret they wanted their kinfolk resettled near the Mekong. From these reasons, Nam Yu Unit initiated plans for a lightning strike to seize Nam Tha for a maximum of six days, long enough to remove all families from the town.

The ambitious scheme pinned its success on two assumptions. First, that Nam Tha was chronically under-defended by thin elements of the Pathet Lao 408th Battalion. Second, that the operation would take place late in the year after the onset of the dry season – when the communists would least expect a major guerrilla push.

As planning progressed, a principal shortcoming of the FG/NW program became obvious. While adequately stocked with small teams, the northwestern forces had fallen behind in building

larger SGU formations. The first attempt at such an offensive unit, Ojibway's 1st SGU Battalion in 1965, had been a failure, primarily because of its unwieldy, multi-ethnic structure.

For the Nam Tha operation, Poe planned not one, but three new SGU battalions, each a coherent ethnic package. All three would be created on an ad hoc basis by collecting volunteers from the teams scattered across FG/NW.

By the late fall of 1967, plans for the Nam Tha operation were finalised and forwarded to the U.S. Embassy for approval. Immediately, a furious debate broke out, with Station Chief Shackley supporting the proposal but with the USAID director, on the grounds that it would exacerbate an already horrendous refugee problem, in staunch opposition.

With a wink from Shackley, Poe proceeded. By mid-December 1967, his three makeshift SGU battalions were assembled and waiting at Nam Yu. Set to head the operation was Lt. Colonel Khampai Vilayphanh, a lowland Lao with a solid combat reputation. According to plan, Khampai would land midway between Nam Tha and Moung Sing with one Mien and one Lu battalion. A second thrust, under the command of Lao Theung leader Khamsene Keodara, would land southeast of Nam Tha. With heavy airstrikes set to soften the target, both columns would then link up within the town proper.

Faithful to the plan, Khampai's task force was lifted by Air America H-34s onto the Moung Sing-Nam Tha road at the end of the month. His two battalions immediately began pushing southeast, encountering little resistance. Simultaneously, Khamsene's Lao Theung battalion was inserted by H-34s just southeast of Nam Tha, taking only a handful of casualties as it evicted the surprised Pathet Lao defenders from the town.

Within two days Khampai arrived, and together the task forces worked their way up the valley. Thousands of refugees emerged to meet the guerrillas. Some 3,500 were lifted out by CASI Porter shuttles; others began walking 46 kilometres southwest toward Vien Pou Kha, the closest major village under RLG control. For two days, Khampai's guerrillas reigned supreme. On the third day, the Pathet Lao regained their composure and began massing for a push from the hills east of the town.

Knowing full well the limitations of his battalions, Poe gave the order for a withdrawal. As instructed, Khampai's guerrillas onloaded H-34s back to Nam Yu. Infuriated, the USAID director fired his area coordinator at Ban Houei Sai for complicity in the operation. Sullivan, in respond to howls from Foggy Bottom, was obliged to slap Poe's wrist.

Into the Middle Kingdom

Almost from the beginning, CIA operations in northwestern Laos had a cross-border component. This was because of Washington's strong interest in getting access to China, especially after Peking slammed the Bamboo Curtain shut in the mid-1960s with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Houa Khong Province, therefore, took on new significance in that it shared a long and porous border with China's Yunnan Province.

It was with China in mind that Tony Poe turned to the Mien hilltribe. With the cooperation of Mien chieftain Chaomai Srisongfa, in early 1966 he selected 18 Mien volunteers with prior team experience. Codenamed Fox, this new detachment was headed by Captain Vernchien Saechao, rated by Poe as "the best team leader at Nam Yu."

Vernchien's men were joined at Nam Yu by a pair of CIA technical advisors who provided three weeks of instruction in the use of the

CIA officer Mike Lynch and Hmong defenders peer down on two dead PAVN soldiers that infiltrated a trench on the Nakhang perimeter, January 1967. (photo via James Morrison)

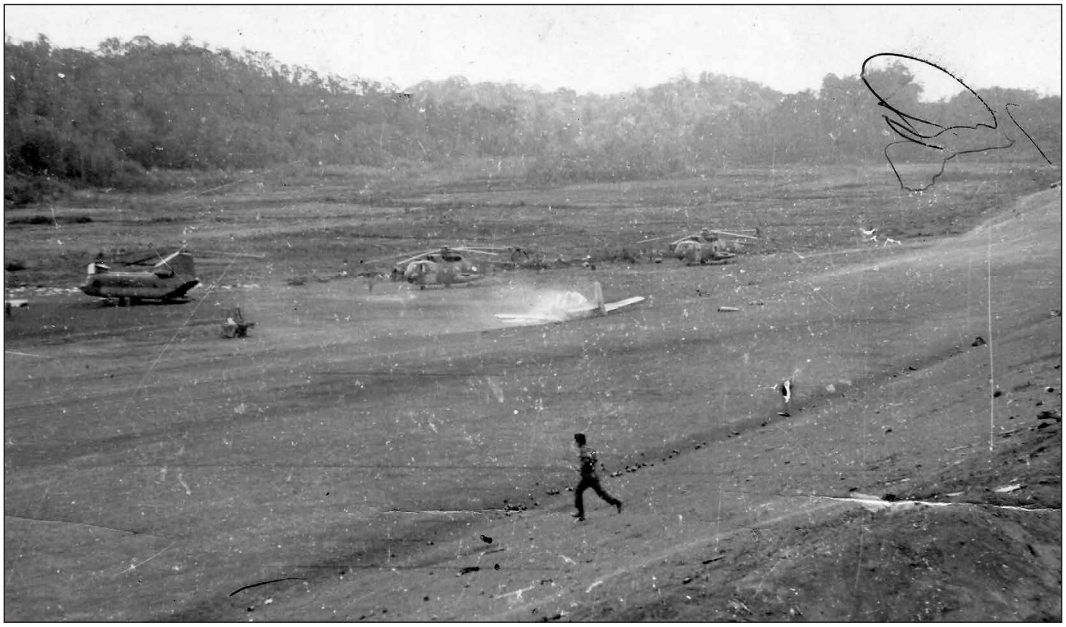
RS-1, the two-man radio set powered by a hand-cranked generator. More important, the advisors trained the guerrillas in wiretapping, which stood at the crux of Fox's cross-border intentions.

Midway through the 1966 rainy season, Team Fox was lifted aboard Air America H-34s to the border northeast of Moung Sing. There they established a campsite, then sent three members five kilometres east toward the Chinese town of Meng Mang. Avoiding contact, the trio located its target: a telephone line running from Meng Mang along the road toward Moung Sing. A tap was affixed to the central insulator, then a 45-meter wire strung to a tape recorder hidden in nearby brush. Remaining until their tapes were exhausted, the three guerrillas then returned to their border camp and were replaced by a new team with fresh tapes.

After a month of recording, Fox was lifted back to Nam Yu. In early November 1966, the team was launched on its second mission in the same vicinity. This time, however, Chinese soldiers were patrolling the lines. Spotting the wire leading from the tap to the recorder, Chinese soldiers gave chase to the Mien guerrillas. Two made it back to the border. One went missing and was presumed dead until 1992, when family members learned that he was still languishing in a Chinese prison.

One year later, a new entity – Team Fox 2 – was ready to cross the frontier. It was to benefit from two technological advances. First, it was equipped with a special CIA tap that was identical in appearance to the insulators used on the Chinese telephone lines and could transmit to a nearby recorder without need for tell-tale wires. Second, Fox 2 was outfitted with a lightweight Delco 5300 radio, tailored specifically to CIA requirements for long-range voice

USAF technician and U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook crew transit Nakhang during the construction of the radar site atop Phou Phathi, 1967. (Author's collection)



The moment a Thai-piloted T-28 crash-lands at the Nakhang airstrip, 1967. It narrowly missed a U.S. Army Chinook and two Pony Express CH-3 helicopters that were helping haul radar equipment to the top of Phou Phathi. (Author's collection)

Brigadier General Vang Pao burns incense for luck ahead of battle. (Author's collection)

or Morse communications. This replaced the RS-1, which had been sharply criticised by the guerrilla teams for its excessive weight and noisy hand-cranked generator.

In June 1967, Fox 2 was launched on its first cross-border foray. Marching for five days from a base camp, they located a telephone line strung along a dirt road. Mounting the pole, one of the men attached the new tap and the team was able to record Chinese conversations for one month without detection.

At the close of 1967, 11 of the original Fox 2 members regrouped for their second cross-border mission. Renamed Fox 3, they were inserted opposite Meng Mang, Fox's original haunt. After one month, the mission was concluded without incident. Two further Fox 3 missions were successfully conducted around Meng Mang in 1968. By that time, however, China – to the concern of Vientiane and Bangkok – was gearing up for a major road-building venture south into Houa Khong Province. Preoccupied with this mounting threat closer to home, Nam Yu had less time to spend on cross-border adventures. Fox 3, as a result, was quietly disbanded, and its remaining members dispersed among other guerrilla formations.

Setbacks in MR 2

In MR 2, PAVN started its 1967 dry season offensive with an attack on Nakhang. Anticipating this, Nakhang had been reinforced over the previous weeks, including construction of a new CIA bunker. Three Americans remained at the base: the CIA's Mike Lynch and Hog Daniels – both in their second year managing the zone's paramilitary affairs – and USAID's Don Sjostrom, coordinating refugee activities.

During the pre-dawn hours of 6 January, as two of the Americans slept (Daniels was on leave), three PAVN columns approached Nakhang. In this, their third major assault on the site in as many years, the Vietnamese departed from their standard nighttime attack and intended to strike at daybreak. They had also timed their offensive to coincide with a spell of bad weather to prevent a repeat of the losses they suffered from close air support during previous Nakhang operations.

At 0600 hours, a Hmong outpost spotted the approaching Vietnamese. With the element of surprise lost, PAVN troops

Hardnose advisor Richard Holm visits Team Bravo north of Thakhek, 1963. By the second half of that year, Vientiane Station eased restrictions enough for Holm to frequently cross the Mekong from Nakhon Phanom to meet with FAR officers and his road-watch teams. (Photo courtesy Richard Holm)

As guerrilla operations in northeastern Laos rapidly expanded, the 4802 JLD decided in 1964 to post an air operations advisor at Long Tieng. Getting the job was Jack Cahill, who had first arrived in Laos in 1961 as an Air America kicker. After a year at Long Tieng, Cahill in 1965 transferred to Nakhang to work alongside Tony Poe. (Photo courtesy Terry Burke)

An M20 75mm recoilless rifle on a denuded hill as Hmong SGU advance in northeastern Laos, circa 1965. (Photo via James Morrison)

A Hmong SGU rests on a hillside in late 1965. Aside from a few civilian items, most of the equipment is standard U.S. Army issue, including an AN/PRC-25 radio, ammunition bandoliers, a M1951 field jacket, and scaled down copies of OG 107 fatigues. Headgear includes M1951 utility caps, a red FAR beret, and camouflage caps. Rice tubes worn over the shoulder are fashioned from red parachute silk. M1 carbines and a pair of Thompson machineguns are on the ground, but Mk 2 and M61 grenades appear to be the weapon of choice. (Photo courtesy George Morton)

Gary "Tool" Erb at Chieng Khong, Thailand, in early 1965. Higher up the bank is the CIA operations and living quarters. Across the Mekong is Ban Houei Sai, Laos. Erb led the survey to establish a base at Nam Yu. (Photo courtesy Gary Erb)

An Air America Helio Courier crash at Nam Yu, August 1965. Compound for RTA intelligence personnel is in the rear right. (Photo courtesy Garb Erb)

Tony Poe's living quarters and outhouse at Nam Yu, 1966. The refrigerator on the front porch was the only modern amenity afforded CIA officers at this remote site. (Photo courtesy James Stanford via James Morrison)

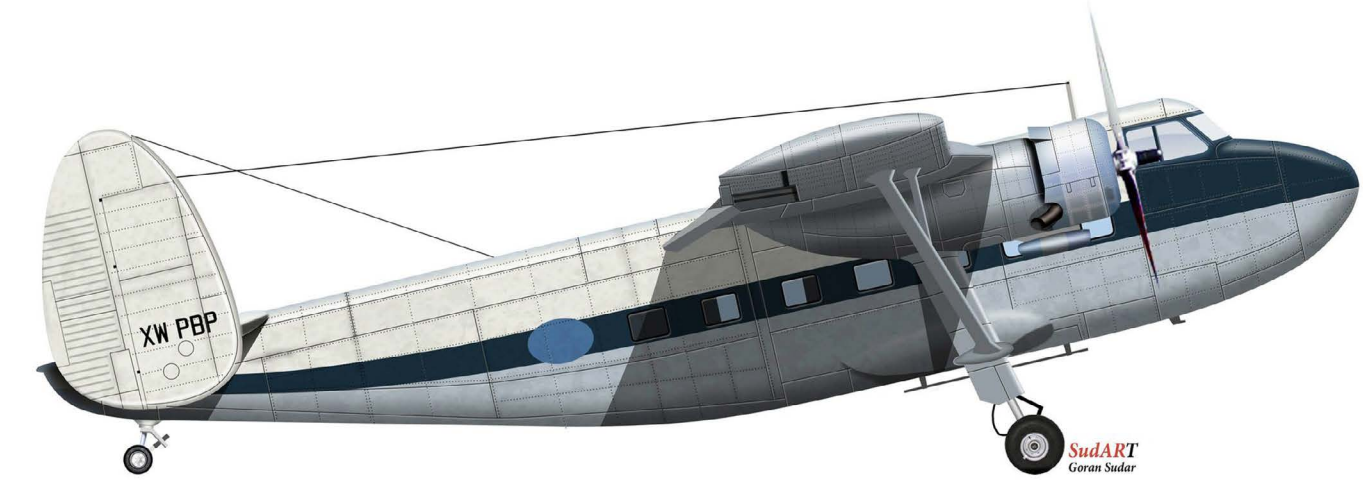
A USAF CH-53 sling-loads the wreck of a North Vietnamese An-2 biplane shot down after making its strafing and bombing run against Phou Phathi, January 1968. The biplane was shot down by an Air America flight mechanic firing from the back of a Bell 205 helicopter – the first instance of a rotary-wing aircraft downing a fixed-wing. (Photo courtesy Ted Moore)

Upper left: SGU tab worn in MR 4, 1969.
Upper right: The initial insignia used by the SGU program in Military Region 3, circa 1967-1968.
Lower left: Shoulder patch used by the 1st SGU Battalion in Military Region 4, 1968-1970.
Lower right: Shoulder insignia were produced in Thailand – but rarely used – for Hmong BG battalions circa 1968, including this one for BG 206. The top reads, "For Peace." (Author's collection)

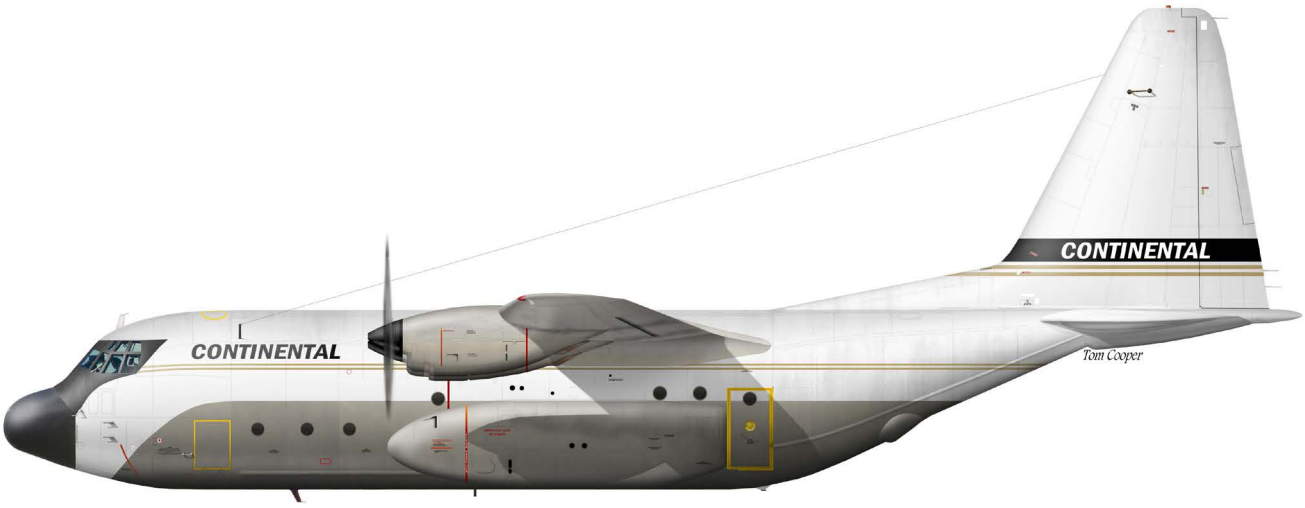
Upper left: Insignia for the Thai artillery contingent – codenamed Star Shine – that covertly deployed to Laos in 1961. Thai year 2504 corresponds to 1961 in the Western calendar.
Upper right: Generic patch used by Thai SR contingents rotating through Moung Soui. Keeping the same initials, the Special Requirements contingents used the cover designation "Sun Rise;" this can be seen in the background iconography.
Lower left: SR 5, the Thai artillery contingent that rotated through Moung Soui circa 1967.
Lower right: Unidentified insignia presented by Thai forces in Laos to Jim Glerum, who took over as deputy chief of the 4802nd JLD in 1968. (Author's collection)

In the spring of 1964, the CIA looked to form a more deniable airline with Thai pilots to resupply road-watch teams in the Lao panhandle. The result was Boun Oum Airlines, a joint project between Air America (which primarily provided maintenance and some training) and Bird & Sons (which provided financing and a range of aircraft). One Do-28 supplied by Bird & Sons was given a unique colour scheme and the Boun Oum Airlines logo – a mythical Thai *singha* lion – on the fuselage. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

Between 1961 and 1964, Bird & Sons acquired at least six Dornier Do-28 twin-engine STOL aircraft. These were inherited by CASI in September 1965, though some, like this example from 1966, retained their Bird & Sons colour schemes for several more years. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



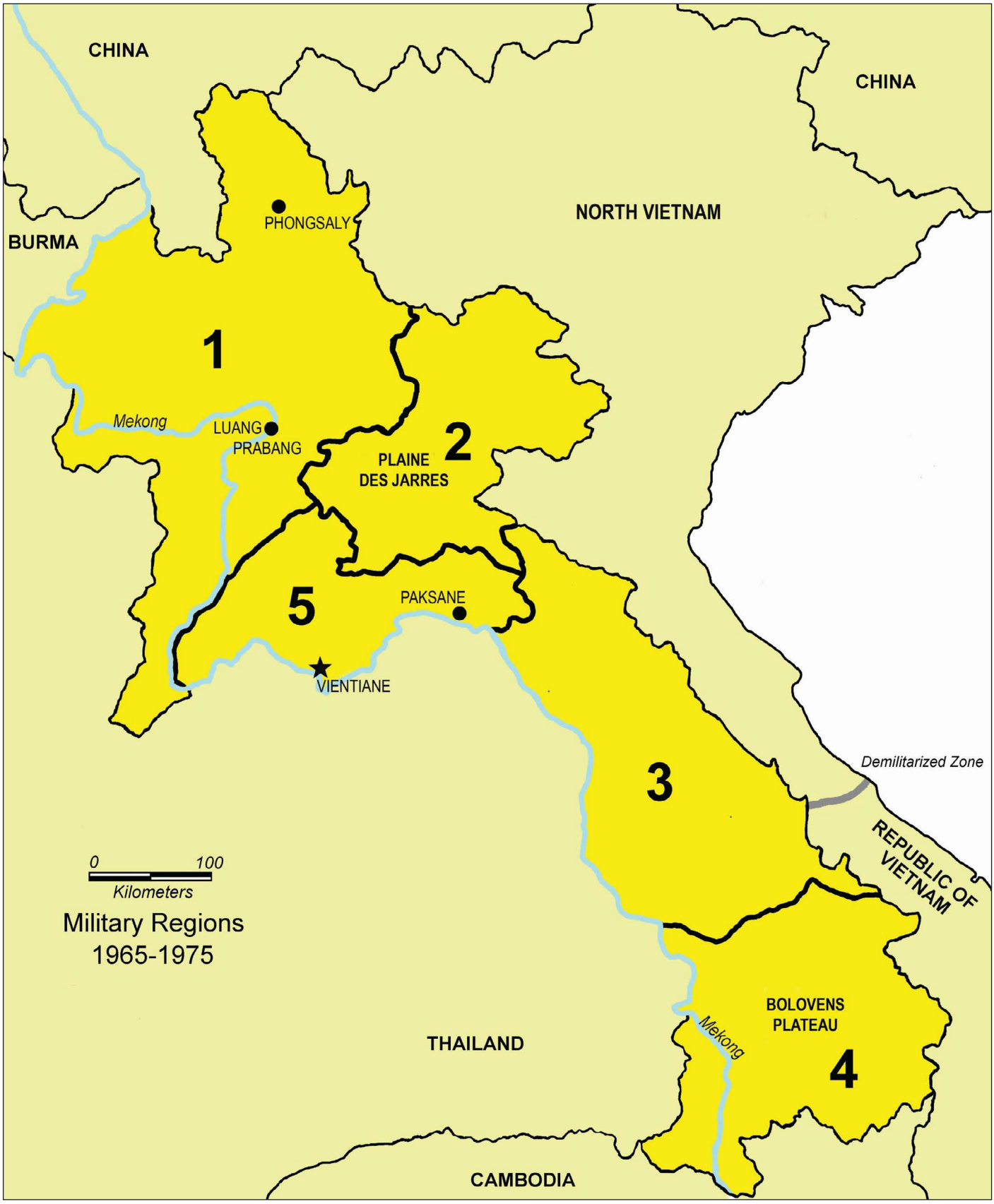
Bird & Sons purchased four Twin Pioneers from Philippine Air Lines in 1963. Two crashed and two were later inherited by CASI in 1965. They arrived in Laos with Philippine Air Line logos still on the fuselage, which were hastily over-painted with grey ovals. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)



CASI took delivery of its first Lockheed L-100-20, the civilian version of the C-130E, in early November 1965. Two were used until mid-1966, after which the airline opted to focus on its inventory of smaller fixed-wing planes. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

Air America acquired this Swiss-built Turbo Porter, serial numbered N358F, in December 1967. It was initially used in South Vietnam before shifting to the Laos theatre in October 1969. With its spectacular STOL abilities, the Turbo Porter was a favourite of both Air America and CASI. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

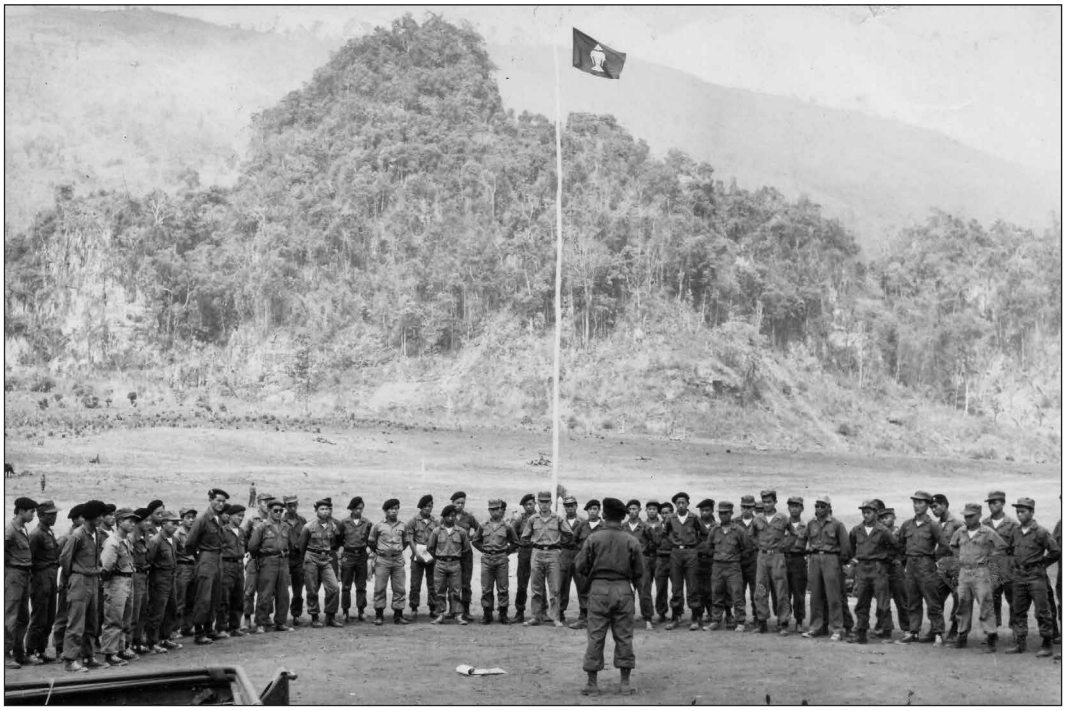
Bell 204 N1196W was acquired by Air America in January 1969. Three months later, a Hmong guerrilla died after accidently walking into its tail rotor at Pha Khao. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



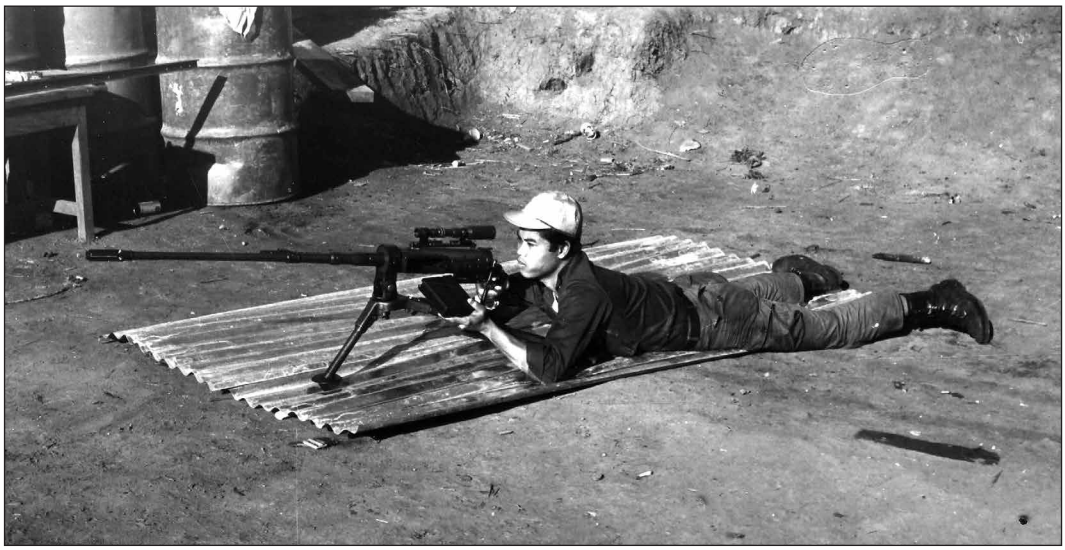
Military Regions of Laos. (Author's map)

unleashed a mortar volley from the north. Inside the camp, Lynch and Sjostrom absorbed the initial PAVN heavy-weapons barrage from the new command bunker, which was dug into a hilltop and topped with dirt-filled gas drums. As Lynch tried to raise air support over the radio, Sjostrom left the bunker and, sawed-off shotgun in hand, stood vigil at an adjacent 75mm pack howitzer position.

With the resident 6th SGU Battalion keeping PAVN at bay, Lynch by 0650 hours had relayed an emergency request for airpower. Running to the howitzer to tell Sjostrom that help was on the way, he arrived in time to see the refugee coordinator fall face forward, a Vietnamese bullet between his eyes. Dirt kicking up around him, the CIA officer retreated back to the bunker. Forty minutes later, a flight of four F-105s arrived overhead. Finding a hole in the cloud cover, the jets buzzed the site, using the noise of their afterburners to send the Vietnamese running for cover. Two USAF A-1Es came on station shortly after that, uplifting spirits among the defenders.



Hmong SGU officers during a planning session at Long Tieng, circa 1967. (Author's collection)



A Hmong guerrilla practicing with a M8C.50-calibre spotting rifle as a sniper weapon, 1967. (Author's collection)

With the PAVN attack entering its second hour, Lynch patrolled the shrinking Hmong perimeter outside his compound. Because the Vietnamese were already holding both sides of the runway, the north slope of the hill overlooking the base, and the gas storage area, the advisor declared anything outside his bunker fair game for bombardment. Taking him at his word, the A-1Es made repeated passes, coming so low that the empty cannon links rattled off the bunker's roof. At 0900 hours, a new A-1 flight relieved the first. Arriving, too, was case officer Daniels, who orbited overhead and directed airstrikes until replaced by a USAF combat controller.

As strong air support continued through the afternoon, Vang Pao came up to Moung Hiem and, keeping at a safe distance so as not to risk a bullet wound like the previous year, relayed commands through the ranking on-site Hmong officer. As the weather began to clear by noon, jets stacked up overhead. With the North Vietnamese taking excessive casualties, and with air support set to continue until morning, Ambassador Sullivan agreed to let U.S. advisors remain at Nakhang through the night in order to stiffen Hmong resolve. The gamble worked and Nakhang survived.

For the next three months, PAVN licked its wounds. Bracing itself for another onslaught, the CIA retained two case officers, Hog Daniels and Bag Odom, at Nakhang. In addition, the Agency took loan of an unmarked U.S. Army UH-1D helicopter outfitted with spray-bars and doused the perimeter with defoliant to push back vegetation and deny PAVN hidden avenues of approach. The effort paid off when the Vietnamese hit on 4 April; the SGUs again bested their opponents.

Beyond Nakhang, Vang Pao began a combination of feints across northeastern Laos that successfully whipsawed PAVN. But more than just feints, Vang Pao was preparing to expand his spoiling manoeuvres into a full-blown rainy season offensive. As in years past, the USAF had prepared a generous assistance package. To assist with accuracy, in May 1967 the Air Force sought permission to use Phou Phathi as site for one of its advanced MSQ-77 target-tracking radar systems. Already, Phou Phathi was being used as a guerrilla staging base, helicopter refuelling point, and, since August 1966, the location for a USAF tactical navigation (TACAN) beacon.

Initially leery of the MSQ-77 request, Ambassador Sullivan gave his blessing in early June. As construction on the radar site commenced, Vang Pao on 23 July kicked off his rainy season offensive by committing most of his guerrilla reserves in an airlift from Nakhang to the outskirts of Hua Moung.

Advancing on a number of fronts, by the fourth quarter of 1967 MR 2 forces had realised gains far beyond any previous year. In Sam Neua, Vang Pao had liberated all but a small oasis around the provincial capital and the Pathet Lao Supreme Headquarters, which in 1965 had moved 19 kilometres east of Sam Neua town into a cave complex near the village of Ban Nakay Neua. Record gains were also registered in southern Xieng Khouang, where RLG forces were able to reoccupy Ta Vieng, harvest the rice crop in the Moung Ngan valley, and seize the high ground overlooking Moung Ngan to the east.

Were Vang Pao to successfully defend his gains during the upcoming dry season, there was growing optimism that he could break the rhythmic cycle of the war. It was at that point, with Vang Pao still beaming from his summer campaign, that the CIA's Vientiane Station began to remould the Hmong from a guerrilla army into a light conventional force. First came semantics. In the late summer of 1967, MR 2 SGU battalions were redesignated as *bataillons guerriers* (BG), literally, "warrior battalions." Keeping the same numerical order in which they were formed, the 1st SGU Battalion became BG 201, 2nd SGU Battalion became BG 202, and so on.

Next, three of the redesignated battalions – BGs 201, 202, and 206 – were grouped into the 21st *Groupement Mobile* (GM 21). Not to be confused with the GM 21 already in the FAR order of battle, this GM 21 was based at Nakhang to serve as Vang Pao's region-wide mobile reserve. More closely resembling a light infantry regiment than a guerrilla formation, command of GM 21 went to Major Youa Vang Ly, the same officer who back in 1962 had headed the first SGU battalion.

In the air, too, Vang Pao's forces were straying from their irregular roots. Given two DC-3 transports and a contingent of Thai civilian pilots, the Hmong general formed Xieng Khouang Air Transport, which was an attempt to create an indigenous alternative to the existing contract airlines.

Besides airlift, Vang Pao was also to get his own tactical air force. Behind this program was Bill Lair, who in 1966 had established at Nong Khai (later shifted to Khon Kaen) a flight training school using a Piper Cub, a Cessna 180, and a pilot-qualified PARU officer. Augmented by six Thai pilots on loan from CASI and two more from the Royal Thai Air Force, three classes of Hmong students were graduated by the summer of 1967. At that point, despite much resistance from the FAR General Staff, Vang Pao was given permission to send two Hmong to the RLAF's T-28 training program at Udorn. From the dozens of Hmong pilots that had passed through Khon Kaen, he chose the two most promising: Vang Tua (his nephew) and Ly Lu (his brother-in-law). Both lauded by their USAF instructors, the pair was set for graduation in January 1968.

Enter the Nung

While Vang Pao was realising gains in northern Laos, far to the south a secret CIA strike unit took root on the Bolovens Plateau. Unlike the earlier Hardnose and Hark road-watch efforts, these new action troops were not Lao, but Nung from South Vietnam. An ethnic minority prevalent in northern Vietnam, the Nung, like the Gurkhas from Nepal, had earned a reputation for their martial spirit. When thousands migrated to South Vietnam after the 1954 communist takeover in Hanoi, the CIA, finding the Nung loyal and disciplined, favoured them as bodyguards and security troops. The Pentagon was equally impressed, liberally seeding recon teams it raised in South Vietnam with Nung commandos.

The Nung tent encampment at LS 165, fall of 1966. Chinese characters on the gate read: "Nung Special Forces Headquarters; For those afraid of death, let the brave come forward; Come forward for the Revolutionary Struggle." (Photo courtesy Luu Nghia Luong)

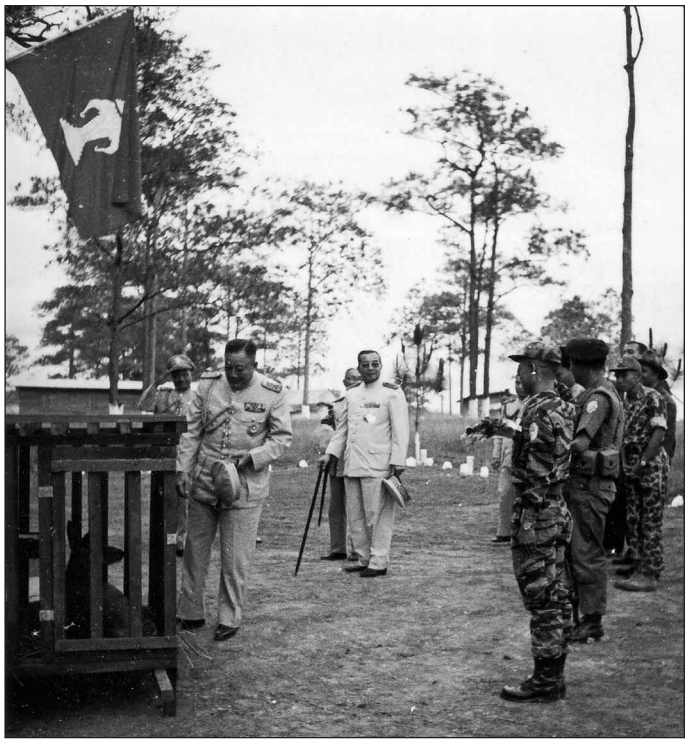
An NCO from the Nung contingent at LS 165, fall of 1966. The flag on the wall was fashioned for the Nung troops in Laos. (Photo courtesy Luu Nghia Luong)

On the basis of these earlier credible performances, it was the Nung who were tapped when the CIA in mid-1966 contemplated forming action teams that would strike eastward from the Bolovens against the Trail. The U.S. military in South Vietnam agreed to help with the recruitment of an 80-man contingent and Paul Barb, a CIA training officer, was dispatched from Laos as liaison.

Very quickly, it was apparent that the Pentagon was not living up to its promise. Instead of offering seasoned Nung, they reneged and gave untrained, urbanised Nung from Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown district.

From Cholon, the raw recruits were given two weeks of processing in South Vietnam, then in August 1966 shipped via Pleiku to the Bolovens. To minimise the chance of adverse publicity, they were based far from prying eyes at Ban Nam Tieng (also known as Lima Site 165, or LS 165), an isolated base 23 kilometres southeast of Houei Kong.

There, amid towering hardwood, two case officers were dispatched to oversee the Nung. The first, George Morton, 52, was a legend in the special warfare community. An infantry veteran of both the Second World War and the Korean conflict, Morton later served as a senior Special Forces advisor in Greece. In Southeast Asia by the early 1960s, Colonel Morton was named commander of USSF advisors in South Vietnam. When Saigon was rocked by a bloody coup in November 1963, however, he was forced to quietly leave the country. Dropping from sight for the next two years,



King Sisavang Vatthana and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma (centre) visit PS 22, 1968. (Photo courtesy Don Stephens)

Morton resurfaced in the Philippines as a CIA paramilitary expert. Detailed from Manila on temporary duty, he arrived in Laos during July 1966 and was placed in charge of the unfolding Nung program.

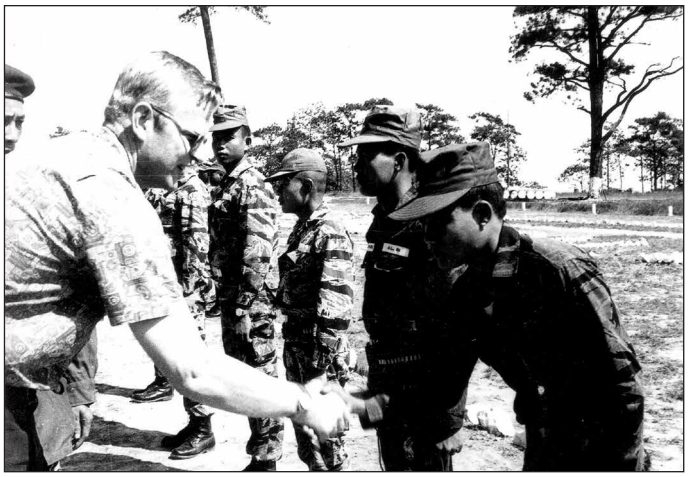
Working alongside Morton was another Special Forces veteran, Mike LaDue. A medic in the 10th USSF Group during the late 1950s, LaDue left the military and was hired as a kicker by Air America. A March 1965 plane crash seriously injured his right leg, cutting his Air America career short. Following a long stateside recovery, he was back in Laos by the summer of 1966. Like Morton, he was now a paramilitary advisor with the Nung.

Very quickly, Morton and LaDue discovered that their Nung commando force was gun-shy. Worse, when a second increment arrived from Cholon, both contingents quarrelled endlessly. In the end, the second increment was sent packing back to Saigon's Chinatown, while the first group, divided into 10-man teams, was pronounced mission ready by the fall of 1966. Dressed in communist uniforms and pith helmets, the Nung were inserted by Air America H-34s or Pony Express along the Trail corridor east of Saravane down to Attopeu. Early missions consisted primarily of seeding roads with anti-vehicle and anti-personnel mines.

By all accounts, the Cholon Nung were a flop. This is perhaps not surprising given that the unit was given nothing more than on-the-job training. "The only way we could get any results," said Morton, "was if we lifted them well east of the Trail, giving them no alternative but to fight their way back west toward Lima Site 165."

Despite misgivings, the first group of Nung finished its tour and was set to be replaced in January 1967 by 80 more untrained recruits from Cholon. This time, however, a 12-man RTSF training detachment would be collocated at LS 165 to offer training for the fresh commandos.

Two new CIA officers took over this Nung contingent. The first was Raymond Doty, an ex-Army NCO. The second was Duncan "Dunc" Jewell, a former Marine lieutenant colonel. From the outset, Doty and Jewell were given three months to decide whether or not to continue the Nung effort. Accordingly, they spent the next 45 days putting the novice Nung through RTSF instruction.



Vientiane Station Chief Ted Shackley greets SGU officers during a visit to PS 22, early 1968. (Photo courtesy Don Stephens)

With training concluded, the 80-man contingent was divided, half assigned to camp security, the other half split into action teams. Set to begin another 45 days of operations, the Nung, to the surprise of their case officers, scored on their very first mission: a heliborne raid against a small PAVN training site. At the cost of one Nung killed, the unit swept through the camp, then moved across an adjacent hilltop and uncovered a shielded red spotlight used to alert truck traffic when planes were overhead. Though showing a hint of promise, the Nung were deemed a poor investment by their CIA advisors. The program, as a result, folded once their scheduled 90-day tour was concluded.

In its wake, LS 165 did not remain vacant long. With Doty remaining on site, Lao Theung road- and river-watch teams previously operating from PS 22 arrived and soon began staging east toward the Trail. In the autumn of 1967, the other Nung advisor, Dunc Jewell, moved 15 kilometres south of LS 165 to a forested clearing. There, locals were enlisted to cut what would eventually become a mammoth 4,000-foot runway. Named PS 38, Jewell's site by year's end was serving as a strong southern anchor for an expanding paramilitary presence on the Bolovens.

Seventeen kilometres southeast of PS 38, two more CIA case officers were assigned to the riverside town of Attopeu. Heading the pair was Doug Swanson, a former USSF sergeant major who had previously spent time at PS 22. From Attopeu, both advisors ventured 34 kilometres farther southeast at the backwater village of Kong My. Long home to a Royalist militia detachment totally reliant on aerial resupply, Kong My (also known as PS 7) had its runway improved. Ringing the site with extensive minefields, the CIA officers began organising local males into irregular warriors. These were eventually divided into 18 teams that targeted the Sihanouk Trail, a network of jungle paths used for funnelling communist supplies north from the Cambodian port of Sihaoukville.

SGUs in the South

As with other military regions, the CIA's Pakse Unit joined the trend toward SGU operations. This began in March 1967 when Wayne McNulty, an ex-U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and former Hark case officer, was given the mandate to raise the region's first SGU battalion. He immediately set about recruiting from Lao Theung tribes on the Bolovens, some of whom had prior Pincushion experience.

Since no seasoned guerrilla officer cadre existed in MR 4, platoon and company commanders were provided from the FAR. The battalion commander, Khamthai Phabmixay, was also an army veteran and, more important, a favourite of the MR 4 commander.

As the facilities at PS 22 were geared for smaller road- and river-watch teams, the SGU battalion began initial training at a makeshift camp near Houei Kong.

Within two months, PS 22 had its facilities upgraded, allowing the battalion to move in. Training was divided into three phases: two weeks of individual soldiery; eight weeks of weapons, individual movement, and small-unit tactics; and six more weeks of platoon and company defensive and offensive manoeuvres. By late May 1967, with four more U.S. paramilitary advisors dispatched to augment McNulty, the region's 1st SGU Battalion was deemed ready for its baptism by fire.

Given the unit's inexperience, it was decided to use just one 100-man company, which would be airlifted in H-34s to a landing zone just south of Chavane. On the ground and stirring up some action, the company would act as bait to draw out PAVN for Lao T-28 strikes. During the first week of June, the designated SGU company was inserted without incident. Within two hours, however, it was being overwhelmed; only a handful of men made it back.

Humbled by this first operation, the remainder of the 1st SGU Battalion continued with small-scale actions through December. Then, some six months after the first fiasco, PS 22 geared up for another company-size mission, this one to be an overnight harassment probe south of Attopeu.

On 28 December, a combined USAF-Air America chopper armada onloaded an SGU company and shuttled the guerrillas without incident. On the following morning, the choppers again assembled at PS 22 for the company's scheduled extraction. With the larger CH-3s in the lead, the choppers headed south. As the first CH-3E, piloted by Major Kyron Hall, arrived at the landing zone, Lao troops rushed the field and began onloading through the back ramp. Seconds later, Major James Villotti landed the second CH-3E and started taking in troops.

Just as some Air America Bells touched down, what had been a quiet landing zone erupted with automatic weapons fire and incoming mortars. With a flight of A-1Es still en route, the choppers were protected only by the guerrillas, who to their credit fired back in organised fashion.

Half-full, Hall's CH-3E hovered at the edge of the clearing and onloaded more of the Lao defenders before lifting from the field without taking a single hit. Less fortunate was Villotti's aircraft, which took a round through the right front window. Compounding matters, the rear ramp would not retract and the chopper, tail-heavy and overloaded with 39 troops (25 being the normal amount), refused to ascend from the landing zone. Ordering the guerrillas to shift forward, and even stuffing a few into the cockpit, Villotti's CH-3E slowly took to the sky. At the cost of one helicopter windshield, Pakse Unit's second company-size SGU operation had shown improvement over the first.

Action from Savannakhet

Further up the panhandle in MR 3, since 1965 a foundation had slowly been building for small-scale action operations. During that year, Colonel Pheng Chanthadouangsy was appointed chief of staff for MR 3 guerrilla forces. Moving to the CIA compound at Naseng, a small hamlet on the southeastern outskirts of Savannakhet, Pheng was given an office next to the CIA's Savannakhet chief of unit.

From Naseng, a request went out in late 1965 to the FAR General Staff for 140 young army officers to jump-start the MR 3 irregular program. To that time, none of the teams fielded from Savannakhet included officers. Vientiane proved mildly sympathetic, agreeing to transfer 40 officers who had recently graduated from their reserve officer schools. The contingent was immediately dispatched to Vientiane for three months of intelligence training, then to Phitscamp in March 1966 for eight weeks of leadership instruction.

By the late spring of 1966, with just one student washing out, the 39 remaining Lao officers were repatriated to Savannakhet. There they were posted to a new guerrilla camp built near the village of Nong Saphong, 25 kilometres north of Savannakhet. The young officers were quickly parcelled out, some going to road-watch teams, others to intelligence-gathering teams, and still others to newly formed action teams.

MR 3's first action teams were actually recycled road-watch units under a new name and with a new mission. Retrained at Nong Saphong, the action-oriented guerrillas were familiarised with weapons up to the 60mm mortar and 3.5-inch rocket launcher. By the end of 1966, roughly one-third of all teams fielded in MR 3 were being used for action missions.

To manage its growing array of road-watchers and action teams, Savannakhet Unit divided MR 3 into three sectors (north, central, and south), each overseen by a single CIA case officer. It would be the northern sector – covering most of Khammouane Province – which would see one of the most spectacular team operations of the entire war. This began in early December 1966, when a Pathet Lao guerrilla defected to a team near Thakhek and gave details about a communist jungle prison at Ban Naden, a secluded village near the entrance to a karst cave. What's more, he said the prison contained an Air America employee.

The CIA had been picking up vague reports about the Ban Naden camp for a year; now with more precise intelligence, Savannakhet Unit began planning for a raid to rescue the prisoners. To lead the raiders, Walt Floyd, the CIA advisor responsible for the northern sector, selected a Lao Theung sergeant named Te. A former FAR paratrooper, Te was allowed to choose members for the raiding party. They then spent two weeks rehearsing the operation at Nong Saphong. Strict secrecy was observed: only Te, his radioman, and the Pathet Lao defector were informed of the mission.

On 5 January 1967, Te and nine of his men loaded up with carbines and bolt cutters. Callsigned Team Cobra, the guerrillas boarded H-34s along with the Pathet Lao defector and were inserted into a landing zone a two-day hike from the prison. Over the next 48 hours, they took an indirect approach to their target.

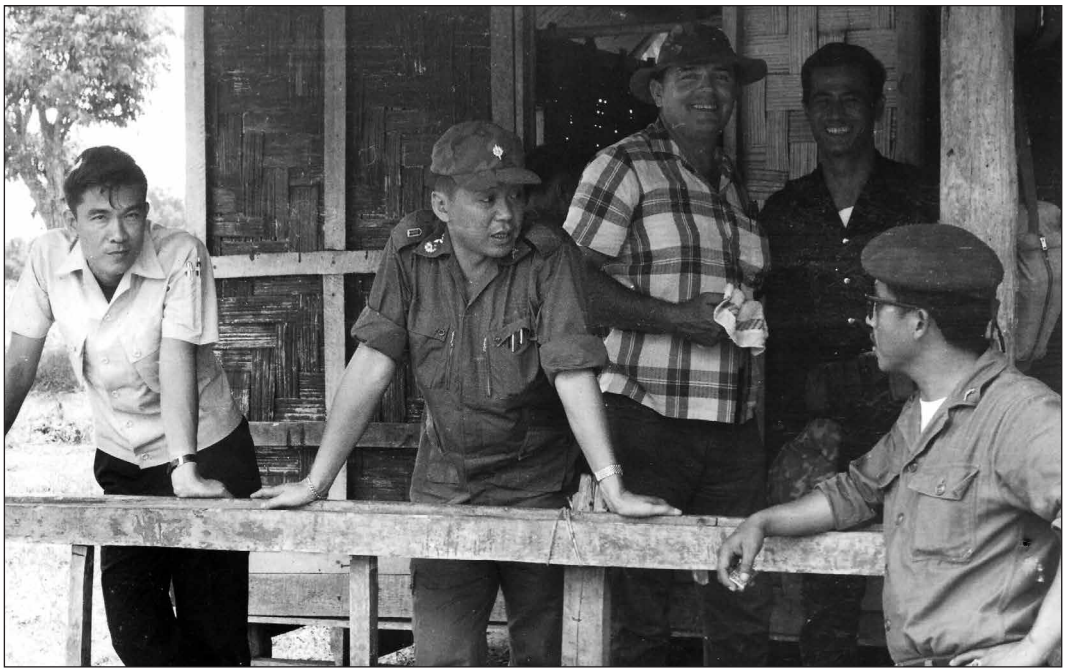
During the darkness of 7 January, the team stole toward the prison camp from along a narrow creek. At 0400 hours, they struck, killing three Pathet Lao guards, wounding another, and driving off the rest. Bolt cutters in hand, Te raced to the mouth of the cave and sliced through the chains holding shut bamboo latticework atop earthen detention cells.

Holed up in one of the cells was Pisidhi Indradat. A former PARU commando, Pisidhi had joined Air America as a kicker and had been aboard a C-46 shot down in September 1963 near Moung Phine. He and four of his crew mates – two other Thai kickers, one Hong Kong Chinese radio operator, and American Eugene Debruin – parachuted from the flaming aircraft and survived, only to be captured and imprisoned by the Pathet Lao. Shunted among four jungle camps over the next nine months, they managed an escape in May 1964. Recaptured six days later, they were tortured before being shifted among three new prison camps.

Following another escape attempt and a bout with malaria, Pisidhi, alone, was beaten all the way to the prison at Ban Naden. Having shown a flair for escape, Pisidhi was isolated in one of its solitary detention cells constructed of mud-and-straw cement hardened over a barbed wire frame. He was eventually joined in the

cell by a FAR officer (who soon died of injuries) and two sergeants. The remaining 80-plus prisoners included Team Juliet, a road-watch unit that had been captured near the Mu Gia Pass, plus several dozen civilians and ex-Pathet Lao who had in some way besmirched communism.

When the Cobra rescue party broke into the camp, Pisidhi, down 31 kilograms from his normal 70, assembled with the other freed prisoners. Many quickly disappeared into the bush, leaving 52 of the ex-captives to join the Cobras for a convoluted escape route west toward a prearranged exfiltration site. Within two hours after the raid, communist troops began to give chase. Forced to go slow because of the poor health of the freed inmates, Te worked his way to the closest roadway, Route 12. Overhead, T-28s arrived and began sniping at the pursuing communist forces. They were soon joined by F-4s, which laid down thick diversionary strikes along Te's new escape route.



Tony Poe visits FAR Colonel Bounchanh Savathphayphan (second from left) at Ban Houei Sai, 1967. Bounchanh in early 1968 was the operations commander during FAR's embarrassing rout at Nambac. (Author's collection)

At Savannakhet, Air America captains Jerry McEntee and Sam Jordan that afternoon were directed to fly a pair of H-34s north to Thakhek. Arriving at 1600 hours, they then got further orders to head east for a team exfiltration. Although company regulations at the time prohibited H-34 flights after sunset, they were assured by case officer Floyd – who climbed aboard one of the choppers – that the rules were waved for this particular mission.

The choppers were quickly airborne, disappearing into the eastern sky. Team Cobra and the ex-prisoners, meantime, veered from Route 12. Shortly thereafter, the sound of helicopter rotors filtered across the jungle. Heartened, the column pushed forward, arriving at a massive black karst outcropping framed by the jungle. There they found the site defended by friendly partisans, part of an ADC that lived in the vicinity.

On the far side of the outcropping sat the two Air America H-34s. Smiling for the first time in months, Pisidhi paused as Floyd took pictures. The photo session over, he crossed to the idling helicopters and, together with the Cobras and some of the ex-prisoners, lifted off from the site. Heading southwest, both H-34s arrived back at Savannakhet shortly after dark.

At the runway to greet them was the RTSF team leader from Whiskey-3 who coincidentally was a high school friend of Pisidhi. The freed prisoner was ushered to the Thai officer's club, where the CIA's Savannakhet Unit chief, Tom Fosmire, showed up with a carton of cigarettes. Pisidhi ended up smoking all night.

For his role in the prison break, Te was awarded a personal commendation by the King of Laos. Apart from that brief ceremony, no other publicity was given to the raid, the most successful prisoner rescue of the entire Second Indochina War.

SGUs in Savannakhet

Though it could more than hold its own in the category of small-unit operations, the Savannakhet guerrilla program was dead last in the push to develop SGU battalions. To catch up, Naseng was directed in March 1967 to form a 300-man SGU battalion composed of three 100-man companies. The bulk of the unit was to be instructed at Nong Saphong, with the cadre sent to Phitscamp, followed by airborne training under FAR auspices at Seno.

Overseeing creation of the battalion was George "Mick" McGrath, a former U.S. Army major with a military record extending from the 505th Airborne Infantry in the Second World War to the early days of the USSF in South Vietnam. In short order, several teams from Savannakhet Province were recalled to Nong Saphong to form the backbone of the battalion's three companies.

On 20 July, four months after the original directive, Nong Saphong officially graduated MR 3's 1st SGU Battalion. Smaller than the irregular battalions of other regions, the entire 300-man contingent was slated to receive its baptism by fire in a raid against a road junction near Lak Sao. Once lifted to their target, however, the untested guerrillas immediately ran into communist forces and began falling back on the first day. With T-28 support unavailable – monsoon rains had swamped Savannakhet – the withdrawal turned into a rout as the battalion sprinted home to Nong Saphong.

Its first SGU operation an embarrassing failure, Savannakhet Unit pinned part of the blame on the small size of the battalion. Accordingly, the decision was made to expand the battalion to 460 men divided among five light companies and a heavy-weapons section. This was accomplished by 1 November.

Before the expanded 1st SGU Battalion had a chance to go back on the offensive, the North Vietnamese beat it to the punch. At 2200 on Christmas Eve 1967, PAVN infantry and commandos (the latter known as "Dac Cong") stole into the RLG-held town of Moung Phalane. Long established as the government's front line in eastern MR 3, Moung Phalane had since early 1965 been exempt from communist pressure due to an unspoken understanding that the FAR would not make any concerted effort to seize territory farther east along Route 9; in return, the communists would not encroach west from Moung Phine.

Confident that Moung Phalane was safe, the RLG during the late summer of 1967 redeployed a FAR airborne regiment, which had made up the bulk of the town's garrison, to the Nambac front. In

place of the paratroopers, just a single infantry battalion defended the Moung Phalane sector.

Despite such an anaemic garrison, Air America continued to maintain a forward radio station in the town manned by Thai and Filipino operators. In addition, the USAF chose the Moung Phalane airfield, four kilometres to the northwest, as site for a TACAN beacon.

For the communists, the Moung Phalane TACAN, which was used in conjunction with airstrikes against the Trail, violated the town's delicate status quo. In fact, it was specifically the beacon that the communist commandos targeted during their Christmas Eve blitz. Unleashing a volley of automatic weapons fire, the North Vietnamese damaged the TACAN before shifting their attention to the adjacent living quarters. Two USAF on-site technicians died in the attack.

Moving into Moung Phalane town, PAVN troops next hit the Air America radio station, killing four Thai. A fifth radioman, Filipino Juan Solita, was taken prisoner. In response, the resident infantry battalion offered token resistance before fleeing west.

Eager for information on the fate of the two TACAN technicians, the U.S. Embassy at sunrise ordered a ground reconnaissance of the site. Handed the assignment was Mick McGrath, the SGU advisor at Nong Saphong, who that afternoon boarded an Air America H-34 piloted by Thai Captain Sariphanh Bhibalkul. Though Air America regulations called for two helicopters with co-captains for potentially dangerous missions, McGrath persuaded Sariphanh and a Thai flight mechanic to fly him on a single ship to Moung Phalane. McGrath also enlisted Captain Bounhong Nhatatiao, commander of the 1st SGU Battalion, to join the recon.

Heading east, Sariphanh rendezvoused with a solitary Forward Air Controller (FAC) plane flying out of Nakhon Phanom. Arriving over the abandoned runway, the FAC buzzed the burned TACAN without drawing fire and declared the vicinity safe.

Descending from orbit, the H-34 bounced to a halt. McGrath sprinted to the blackened beacon and disappeared into the adjacent living quarters. While inside, the landing zone began to take intense small-arms and mortar fire. Sariphanh added power as the chopper was riddled by bullets. With two dog-tags in hand, the CIA officer reappeared, bounded back to the H-34 and jumped through the open side door. As it rose slowly, rounds continued to pelt the aircraft. Sariphanh, bleeding from shrapnel in his forearm, struggled to gain altitude. Just before getting out of range, a bullet sliced through the H-34's skin and severed the oil line. The engine protested, coughed, and finally quit. Wrestling with the controls, Sariphanh aimed the chopper into a jungle clearing 10 kilometres west of Moung Phalane.

As darkness fell, the CIA officer and two Thai huddled inside the crippled chopper. Captain Bounhong squatted off in the corner, his camouflage shirt having been sliced open by a bullet without so much as giving him a scratch – a minor miracle he attributed to the multiple Buddhist amulets adorning his neck.

At 0615 the next morning, Air America Captain Ed Reid materialised overhead in an H-34 and plucked the four to safety. Back at Savannakhet, a shaken Sariphanh turned in his resignation. So did Bounhong, who relinquished command of the 1st SGU Battalion to his deputy and returned to less life-threatening duty in the FAR.

4
A YEAR BEST FORGOTTEN

Nambac was a debacle waiting to happen. The stage for this had been set over the course of 1967, when the FAR General Staff diverted waves of infantry and paratroopers to the Nambac valley and its surrounding hills. The communists had been accommodating over the rainy season, falling backward according to the annual combat cycle. But as the monsoon rains sputtered to a close in October, the FAR generals surmised that the upcoming dry season could be a turning point in the war if they consolidated their rainy season gains.

To make this happen, they ordered the garrison to begin new offensive actions east toward MR 2. At the same time, FG/E's 1st SGU Battalion, untested until that point, spearheaded a diversionary strike northwest toward Moung Sai.

As government forces surged forth on 7 October, North Vietnamese troops suddenly counter-punched, sending a FAR airborne regiment reeling backward on the southeast front. Apart from two short-lived guerrilla gains, the rest of the garrison by early November had failed to extend the frontline.

With MR 1 needing help, Vang Pao – in a move smacking of prudent diplomacy – ordered an MR 2 Hmong task force to move west, with the intent to rendezvous with an army column heading east from Nambac. The manoeuvre was codenamed, appropriately, Operation Link Up.

As Link Up made progress, the dry season arrived in northern Laos. Taking advantage of the favourable weather, Hanoi in early December ordered the entire 316th Infantry Division and elements of the 335th Independent Regiment to the Nambac front. With the arrival of these troops, communist pressure took an expanding toll on the Nambac defenders. In December alone, 42 FAR troops were killed and 72 wounded.

To augment the Nambac defences, Vang Pao increased his Link Up contribution to an entire irregular battalion. As the Hmong pressed west, paratroopers were loaded aboard Lao H-34s and shuttled east of the Nam Ou River. There they met an advance party of Hmong guerrillas and together moved two kilometres northeast into Moung Ngoi.

Back in the Nambac valley, the RLG's defences were rapidly unravelling. By the end of the first week of January, communist forces, wielding a single 82mm mortar, were able to close the airfield. Unable to use the runway, Air America C-123Ks soon appeared overhead, dropping much-needed supply pallets to the beleaguered garrison.

On 13 January, PAVN shifted its sights toward the garrison's command post. Under fire and fearing that the Nambac valley had already fallen, the ranking FAR colonel panicked. With haste, he, as well as his staff and an RTSF advisor, started evading to the south.

The move proved contagious. As other FAR regiments withdrew toward Luang Prabang, the paratroopers maintained a lonely vigil at Moung Ngoi. Except for a handful of guerrillas, the promised

PARU commandos at the MSQ-77 radar site adorned with camouflage netting atop Phou Phathi. (Author's collection)

Military Region 2 prisoner debriefing centre at Pha Khao, 1966. (Author's collection)

Hmong battalion had fallen hopelessly behind schedule and had yet to arrive.

The 316th Division, meanwhile, had just taken delivery of a shipment of Soviet-made 122mm rockets – never before seen on the Laos battlefield and intended for use against the Nambac valley. But with Nambac abandoned, the airborne troops became ground zero for the projectiles. With missiles raining down on Moung Ngoi, one hit a cluster of Hmong guerrillas, killing seven. Their position quickly growing untenable, the paratroopers packed their gear and exfiltrated.

As Nambac quickly became the worst defeat in FAR's history, forgotten was any hope that the 1967-68 dry season would allow the RLG to transcend the cyclical pattern of the war and permanently seize the strategic initiative in northern Laos.

A Mountain Most Cursed

In Sam Neua Province, government activity through the second half of 1967 focused around Phou Phathi mountain. There, construction of a sophisticated USAF radar station continued through the summer as Air America Caribous hauled the disassembled radar to forward jungle airstrips in Sam Neua. The equipment was then sling-loaded to the Phou Phathi summit by Pony Express and CH-47 Chinooks on loan from the U.S. Army, and assembled by a team of USAF technicians under cover as Air America employees.

Completed by October 1967 – just as deteriorating weather conditions over North Vietnam were beginning to hamper airstrikes – the radar station comprised three vans resembling olive drab mobile homes. Sited on the edge of a sheer cliff overlooking the southwestern face of the ridge, the station was collocated with the TACAN beacon established in August 1966. The USAF technicians lived and worked at this compound, receiving their supplies via a helipad located 300 meters to the southeast.

To defend the sophisticated radar, a single guerrilla company was deployed to the vicinity of the helipad. In addition, the south approach to the ridge was blocked by another company of Hmong militia under Captain Gia Too.

Judging these two companies as inadequate protection, Headquarters 333 in November offered a 40-man contingent named Team Z-16. Composed of RTA infantry and heavy-weapons crews, command of the team was held by Captain Chamlong Srimuang, 33, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. Forming the last line of defence, the Thai team ringed the mountain helipad with machine guns, rocket launchers, and mortars.

Besides serving as a USAF radar/TACAN station, Phou Phathi continued to function as a paramilitary launch site. To oversee this role, the CIA had two case officers assigned to the mountain. The first, Terry Quill, had arrived the previous summer after spending a year as advisor to the MR 2 interrogation centre at Pha Khao. The second, Woody Spence, was an air operations specialist who already had served stints at Udorn, Luang Prabang, and Long Tieng. Both case officers operated from a cluster of huts and a bunker built next to the helipad.

Wreckage of the North Vietnamese An-2 biplane that attacked Phou Phathi put on display in Vientiane, spring 1968. The sign reads: "Please come to see the carcass of a North Vietnamese plane." (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)

From there, the two CIA officers focused primarily on running road-watch and intelligence-gathering teams across Sam Neua Province. In this they were helped by a PARU detachment, Team Z-14, which was stationed at Houei Tong Ko, 50 kilometres west. Because of the questionable loyalty of the local Hmong – including Gia Too, who was suspected of collaboration with the Pathet Lao – relatively little effort was initially given to expanding an ADC net in the immediate area around the ridgeline.

The radar, meanwhile, was quickly pressed into heavy use. By November 1967, 13 percent of U.S. airstrikes over the northern portion of North Vietnam were controlled by Phou Phathi's radar. Within three months, this figure had increased to 55 percent. In addition, 20 percent of U.S. strikes flown in northeastern Laos were under its guidance.

The increased activity atop Phou Phathi did not go unnoticed by communist forces. During October 1967, the same month the radar became operational, a hand-picked commando team from PAVN's 305th Dac Cong Command was dispatched to conduct a reconnaissance of the ridgeline. Finishing it the following month, the commandos concluded that a direct ground attack on the ridge was not unfeasible; instead, they suggested an airstrike to soften the target.

Meanwhile, Vang Pao decided to add some muscle to Captain Gia Too's Phou Phathi garrison by airlifting in a 105mm howitzer. To feed the lone artillery piece, Air America Bell 205 choppers over the ensuing week shuttled ammunition from the Phou Phathi helipad down to Gia Too's base camp.

At 1300 hours on 12 January, while two Bell 205s were onloading 105mm ammunition on the pad, explosions erupted near the radar station; to the amazement of those present, the site was being bombed by biplanes. Taking the Dac Cong's November 1967 recommendation to heart, Hanoi had ordered the first PAVN airstrike on foreign soil. Only instead of using one of the MiG jets in its inventory, the Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) had elected to modify some of its Soviet-made An-2 Colt biplanes from its 919th Air Transport Regiment into bombers.

To give the An-2 teeth, the VPAF had modified four airframes with thirty-two 57mm rockets in wing pods. In addition, a section of the floor had been cut open to hold a dozen tubes. Each tube contained a 120mm mortar round, which, when released, would be armed in the slipstream to detonate on impact.

On 12 January, all four An-2s had taken to the air from Hanoi and headed for Laos. Two aircraft entered a border orbit; the other two continued southwest toward Phou Phathi. Dropping low, the pilot in the lead plane established radio communication with a Dac Cong commando who had infiltrated to the base of the mountain. With the commando vectoring them toward their target, both aircraft made a rocket pass over the summit. The radar, however, was well camouflaged with olive netting, a precaution taken the previous month following reports of VPAF MiG jets making shallow forays along the Sam Neua border.

Owing in part to the camouflage and in part to the inexperience of the VPAF crews, all rockets went wide of their mark and hit empty jungle. Circling the ridge once, the biplanes aligned themselves for a bombing run. The 120mm rounds salvoed from the tubes, spreading across the edge of the helipad, the SGU company encampment, and the surrounding jungle canopy. The company suffered two dependents and two troops killed and two other soldiers wounded. One Thai and some of the structures near the helipad were hit by flying debris. The radar and TACAN were unscathed.

Before the planes had finished their second run on the site, the Phou Phathi defenders were firing back. Thai gunfire riddled the first biplane, which wavered as it headed northwest. At the helipad, Air America Captain Ted Moore, his crew chief Glen Wood, and an RTA officer kicked out the 105mm ammunition stacked in the back of their Bell and lifted from the helipad. Banking the chopper

northwest along the ridge, Moore looked over the starboard side and saw one of the An-2s through the clouds below. Wood, retrieving an AK-47 he kept stowed in the rear, leaned out the sliding door and took a bead on the biplane.

Already damaged from the earlier groundfire, the plane was already fast losing altitude. Its pilot fought to clear a ridgeline, but it ploughed into the jungle and exploded. As Moore watched the first biplane burn, Wood yelled over his helmet microphone that the second An-2, following the same flight path as the first, was closing fast. Leaning from the door, Wood fired on the plane, hitting his target. The biplane pitched forward, then banked in a lazy arc. It plunged into the triple canopy, ripping off its wings but not exploding.

At 1600 hours that afternoon, a mixed Hmong/PARU team was heli-lifted to the crash site. Inside the wrecked plane they found a dead bombardier and a pilot and co-pilot, both injured but alive. The survivors were immediately executed by the Hmong guerrillas. Two of the bodies were removed from the plane; the third, however, had a leg pinned under the engine. Ever resourceful, one of the PARU commandos took his machete and hacked off the leg at the thigh. All three bodies were brought back to Long Tieng and displayed in open body-bags on the edge of the runway for two days. As the stench on the apron grew unbearable, the three corpses – by then in a very ripe state – were turned over to the North Vietnamese Embassy in Vientiane.

As a less grisly war trophy, a USAF HH-53B Super Jolly Green Giant chopper sling-loaded the An-2 wreck back to Nakhang; it was then lifted to Vientiane and put on public display.

Following the An-2 attack, the defences at Phou Phathi were augmented. To defend against another airstrike, a captured communist 12.7mm heavy machine gun was placed at the radar compound; a second 12.7mm gun was positioned on the west end of the helipad. Also lifted to the helipad was a captured Soviet 85mm field gun, which was used – on the rare occasion 85mm ammunition was available – for direct fire against suspected communist positions to the east. In addition, a sandbagged bunker was constructed at the radar compound.

To coordinate air support and pinpoint the mushrooming number of communist targets around the ridge, a USAF combat controller, Sergeant James Gary, was transferred to Phou Phathi. Establishing an observation bunker on a rocky outcropping east of the helipad, Gary brought in a full range of UHF/VHF/HF radio gear. A generator to run the radio net was placed alongside the bunker, and a.50-calibre machine gun was positioned on top. Returning to the CIA's helipad compound by night, Gary would spend daylight hours at the observation post collating target information from indigenous patrols, road-watch teams, and FAC planes. This information was digested, then passed back to Udorn RTAFB. In addition, if targets to the east of the ridge could be visually identified, as was increasingly the case, Gary vectored in aircraft with the help of a spotting scope.

For its part, PAVN spent no time lamenting its laughable airstrike. (In their official military histories, Hanoi claimed their two planes were lost because they collided while evading down a narrow ravine.) Within three days, North Vietnamese troops made a surprise blitz 40 kilometres west of Phou Phathi, capturing the runway and resupply base at Moung Son. Other communist forces circled north and northeast, pushing to within 13 kilometres of the ridge. Equally ominous, PAVN infantrymen on 22 January overwhelmed the guerrilla positions 11 kilometres to the east and 17 kilometres south.

Problems, too, were surfacing with the defences closer to Phou Phathi. During a January tour of the ridgeline, case officers Spence and Quill found the northwestern face devoid of barriers – no barbed wire, mines, or fallen trees – and easily scaled. As a remedy, more concertina and claymores were strung that same evening along the slope. In addition, a mixed Hmong-RTA outpost was established northwest of the radar.

Finally, on 2 February Vang Pao dispatched his best field commander, Major Chong Shoua Yang, to head Hmong forces around the ridgeline. Chong Shoua Yang, who earlier in his career had kept the North Vietnamese at bay for two years at Phou Nong, more than met his match at Phou Phathi. Within days after he arrived, PAVN rushed elements of the 316th Division, confident after its lopsided victory at Nambac, into Sam Neua Province. Massing near Sam Neua town, the division's 174th Regiment began a slow advance west toward the Phou Phathi front.

Besides infantry, PAVN road construction crews were furiously clearing a path from the Sam Neua provincial capital toward the ridge. When the weather was clear, U.S. airpower pummelled the Vietnamese road-workers and kept progress to a minimum. During the second week of February, however, a cold spell hit the region, covering the mountain with ice and the surrounding lowlands with a thick cushion of fog. For nine straight days, the frigid temperatures persisted. On the tenth day, the fog lifted and the CIA officers looked east. To their amazement, they could plainly see the PAVN road – dubbed Route 602 – closing fast.

With PAVN bulldozers and 400 laborers running a marathon construction effort to extend Route 602 to Phou Phathi's doorstep, the USAF during mid-February responded with more tactical air support. At the same time, a pair of demolitions experts from the CIA's Technical Services Division flew to Phou Phathi and installed two rows of launch tubes that fired 2.75-inch rockets normally slung under the wings of aircraft. Pointed east, the rockets were to be used to harass the roadbuilders.

By then, PAVN intentions were painfully obvious. Growing desperate, Vang Pao again augmented Phou Phathi's defences. First, another 105mm howitzer and two 4.2-inch mortars were added to Captain Gia Too's base camp arsenal. Second, ADC militiamen were sent to garrison a dirt airstrip on the valley floor off the southwestern face of the ridge. Third, guerrilla reconnaissance teams were launched toward Sam Neua town in an attempt to locate arms depots for aerial interdiction. Already, U.S. airpower was being used to seed the area east of the ridge with cluster bomb units, while the radar was being used almost exclusively to direct strikes for its own defence.

Despite these measures, the CIA had concluded in a 4 March cable that Phou Phathi's future as a viable TACAN/radar position was all but over. Still, Vientiane Station believed that the mountain could be held as a terrain feature if adequately supported by tactical air power, thus serving the useful purpose of tying up PAVN troops.

Just as the CIA was reassessing its views of the ridgeline's role, Ambassador Sullivan during the first week of March permitted five more USAF technicians to go to Phou Phathi, augmenting the 11 already present. This enabled the USAF detachment to divide into shifts and keep the radar operational 16 instead of the usual eight hours a day.

On the morning of 10 March, an Air America Bell 205 landed at Phou Phathi. Leaving aboard it was Sergeant Gary, whose tour was over, and CIA officer Terry Quill, taking a scheduled leave. Remaining on the mountain was the CIA's Spence and Gary's replacement, Roger Huffman, 22, who had arrived at Phou Phathi

the previous month. Also remaining was Howard Freeman, the former MR 1 case officer now posted at Nakhang with Bag and Hog, who was filling in for Quill on short notice.

As Gary and Quill left the site, the weather, cloudy during the previous week, cleared somewhat. Below, Vietnamese soldiers were seen moving in the valleys on either side of Phou Phathi. Believing that a final showdown was imminent, Vang Pao – promoted to major general on the first of the month – announced that he would try to scrape together almost two Hmong guerrilla battalions to restore a government presence west of the ridge.

As night approached, the Air Force technicians gathered inside their cliffside station to review evacuation procedures. Their position on the mountain having grown too risky, the ranking officer informed his men that they would have no more than two days before evacuation was necessary.

At 1800 hours, the technicians, still in conference, were rocked by a series of fierce thunderclaps outside their radar van. Their sandbagged bunker, smouldering in a useless heap, had taken a direct rocket strike. A second round had sliced into the adjacent living quarters.

Down at the helipad, Spence and Freeman coincidentally had been experimenting with their new rocket launchers. Loading them with seven projectiles, the two case officers had intended to fire harassment rounds toward a suspected PAVN troop concentration. With wires hooked up to the rear nozzles, the circuit was completed to a battery pack. Second after the first two rockets impacted, they heard an ominous rumbling in the distance.

With unbridled ferocity, PAVN heavy-weapons fire from east of the ridge began to ravage the summit. Running back to their billet, the two case officers retrieved a Bayside 990 tactical radio and rushed to the safety of the nearby bunker. Up at the radar site, the Air Force technicians rummaged through the remains of their living quarters, salvaging survival radios, M16 rifles, and other gear.

By 1945 hours, the PAVN gunners paused, allowing the CIA officers to leave their bunker and consult with Major Chong Shoua Yang and RTA Captain Chamlong. No casualties had been suffered among the defenders along the summit. At Gia Too's position, however, an artillery round had landed square on the 105mm position, disabling both howitzers.

At the radar site, six technicians returned to the control van to man the consoles. They soon had two A-26s and five F-4s under radar control hitting targets around the ridge. The remaining 10 technicians took sleeping bags and tried to get some rest. Five crawled over the cliff's edge and settled on top of camouflage netting stretched across a rocky ledge. Twenty meters south, two other technicians lowered themselves onto a second, smaller ledge. Above them, the last three technicians placed their sleeping bags around the 12.7mm machine gun nest.

After a 45-minute lull, the PAVN barrage resumed, this time from the south. The CIA officers ran back to their bunker to establish radio contact with Long Tieng. One projectile almost hit the bunker, slicing the Bayside 990 antenna cable and grounding it.

East of the helipad, Roger Huffman, the young combat controller, had badly injured his leg as he tripped while running toward his observation bunker. Reaching his post, Huffman immediately contacted the orbiting A-26 crews and updated them on the attack. He then spent the rest of the night coordinating air support in the vicinity.

At 2130, the second PAVN heavy-weapons onslaught came to an end. A C-130 flareship was already overhead illuminating the night sky. "This didn't do the friendlies much good," commented Spence, "as they were all hiding. It probably assisted the Vietnamese in climbing up the west slope of the karst."

Indeed, the valley to the west of Phou Phathi was alive with PAVN activity. In the lead was a hand-picked 21-man Dac Cong team assigned with scaling the summit. As they headed up the cliff, they were followed by an infantry battalion. At the same time, elements of the 316th Division were massing for a diversionary frontal assault against Gia Too's defensive line.

For the last two hours of 10 March, sporadic small-arms fire – most likely from edgy Thai and Hmong defenders – crackled across the summit. At the radar, the 10 USAF technicians remained huddled in sleeping bags along the ridge while their six colleagues tracked aircraft inside the radar van.

Meanwhile, down in Vientiane Ambassador Sullivan decreed that a partial evacuation – nine of the 16 technicians – be conducted at 0815 hours the next morning. Before that could be done, at 0300 hours the Dac Cong team arrived on the summit, 100 meters northwest of the radar site. Circling the site, they opened up with automatic weapons fire and grenades. The three technicians sleeping near the machine gun nest grabbed their rifles, radios, grenades, and survival vests and lowered themselves over the cliff onto the cramped ledge already occupied by two fellow technicians.

Inside the radar van, their Air Force colleagues heard the PAVN attack. Two exited and ran around the west side closest to the cliff, only to be immediately felled by lethal PAVN fire. On the ledge, five technicians pressed against the karst face for protection. From above, however, half a dozen Dac Cong spotted the cornered men. As the Vietnamese peered down, one technician trained his M16 upward and fired. The PAVN commandos answered with grenades, mortally wounding one and peppering three with shrapnel. The Vietnamese came forward again, spraying the ledge with AK-47 fire. Bullets bounced off the rock, cutting the survivors with limestone fragments. One technician absorbed a direct hit and slowly bled to death.

From the radar van, four other technicians attempted an escape. A grenade flashed, and one of the technicians went down. Another was heard crying, loudly at first, then fainter. Nothing was seen of the other two. The Dac Cong, by then swarming the site, tossed grenades into the remains of the living quarters and radar van. They then moved toward the larger of the two ledges, where five technicians were atop the camouflage netting. Spotting the airmen, the Vietnamese struck with grenades and automatic weapons. Three of the five technicians were killed; two wounded survivors played dead in a successful attempt to avoid further attention.

Down at Udorn RTAFB, USAF Captain Alfred Montrem was woken at 0530 hours for an emergency briefing. Entering the operations room of Detachment 2, 37th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Montrem was told that his HH-53B Super Jolly Green Giant would lead the evacuation of Phou Phathi.

Rushing to the flight-line, Montrem's aircraft took to the sky and headed north. At Long Tieng, Air America Captain Ken Wood got a similar call to action. Crossing to the chopper pad, he and flight mechanic Loy "Rusty" Irons boarded a Bell 205 and lifted off for the beleaguered ridge.

While the evacuation choppers were still en route, at 0630 hours Freeman and Spence left their bunker and ventured to the helipad. There they found a chaotic mob of Hmong and RTA troops. At that point, with the radar site having been out of radio contact for several hours, Freeman elected to investigate along with Major Chong Shoua Yang and 15 of his guerrillas. Disappearing into the jungle west of the helipad, Freeman, armed with a Browning automatic shotgun,

and the Hmong headed up the slope. Minutes later, Spence heard sporadic fire from the radar site. Shortly thereafter, Freeman's patrol returned. Chong Shoua Yang immediately set up a 60mm mortar and began heaving rounds toward the summit. Freeman, his right calf bleeding from an AK-47 round, said that they had reached the radar van clearing and encountered Vietnamese; he had exchanged fire, killing one before his shotgun jammed. No living Americans were seen.

East of the helipad, combat controller Huffman had spent the night listening to automatic weapons fire across the ridge – some of it coming from the direction of the helipad. When dawn broke, convinced that the landing zone had been captured, he slipped on a PRC-25 backpack radio, prepared a survival bag, and began limping down the ridgeline toward Gia Too's garrison. He had not gotten far when his radio crackled to life and Spence – out of touch for 10 hours – told him to return to the helipad.

Relieved, Huffman hobbled back up the slope and joined the mob of troops and advisors crowding the landing zone. Up at the radar van, with the evacuation choppers minutes from Phou Phathi, the Dac Cong commandos fed ammunition into the 12.7mm machine gun on the ledge and began directing a volley down the slope. Unable to depress the angle of the muzzle low enough, the Vietnamese could not put the helipad under fire. However, once the noise of aircraft filled the sky, they turned the machine gun upward and unleashed a torrent of fire.

By then, A-1Es from the Udorn-based 602nd Air Commando Squadron had taken up racetrack orbits over the ridgeline. Joining the fighters, an O-1E FAC plane arrived overhead to coordinate air support. Spotting the FAC plane, Spence turned on the Bayside 990, only to discover that its antenna cable had been partially severed during the previous night's bombardment. Communicating through fierce static, he told the FAC – based on Freeman's findings – that the radar site held no living Americans and the machine gun nest could be neutralised with heavy ordnance.

Returning for another run, the prop fighters rained ordnance across the mountain. Some of the bomblets hit near the helipad, killing and wounding dozens of guerrillas. As Spence screamed corrections over the Bayside, the FAC vectored the next pass closer to the radar site. When the dust and smoke settled, the radar dish could be seen lying on the side of the van. There was no return hostile fire.

As the A-1Es were making their final pass, Captain Ken Wood arrived in his Bell 205. While Wood concentrated on the controls, his flight mechanic, Rusty Irons, shouted that he could see survivors waving from a crevice on the ledge. With the ridge too tight to land on, Wood fought to stabilise in a hover as the Bell twisted in the updraft off the karst wall. Irons then secured a rescue hoist out the side door and lowered a wedge-shaped jungle penetrator. Four technicians were soon lifted aboard. Bloodied and torn, the last collapsed on the cabin floor and yelled that one more technician was alive on the ground.

The Bell rocked in an updraft. Focused on the controls, Wood heard dull thuds as small-arms fire raked the belly of the chopper. He pulled the Bell away from the ledge in an evasive manoeuvre, then steered toward Nakhang. In the rear cabin, PAVN rounds ripped through the bottom of the ship. One of the USAF technicians slumped on the canvas seating. Blood began to stream from a bullet wound in his buttocks; he died en route to Nakhang.

Back at Phou Phathi, an A-1E buzzed the helipad and pronounced the landing zone safe for USAF evacuation choppers. Southwest of the ridge, Captain Al Montrem refuelled his HH-53 from an orbiting HC-130 tanker, then headed for the helipad. Upon landing, the injured Freeman and 29 Hmong came aboard and sprawled on the cabin floor, lined with flak vests for extra protection. Before it left, Chong Shoua Yang stepped forward, yanked off seven healthy guerrillas and replaced them with seven wounded colleagues. Montrem then took off for Nakhang.

Next to arrive was Air America Captain Phil Goddard. Landing his Bell 205 at the helipad, he onloaded Huffman, a Thai interpreter, and Hmong officers. Between their legs were stuffed three large boxes filled with CIA files, which Spence had retrieved from the bunker's safe before climbing into the vacant co-pilot's seat.

As Goddard pulled away, USAF Captain Jack Allison circled a second HH-53 over the helipad and landed. The layer of flak vests normally lining the floor had been left behind to lighten the load,

Major General Vang Pao inspects Major Xay Dang Xiong's BG 206 at Long Tieng, late spring 1968. (Photo courtesy Xay Dang Xiong)

allowing extra Hmong guerrillas to pile into the rear. With his chopper packed tight, he headed for Nakhang.

By 1000 hours, Captain Goddard had offloaded his cargo at Nakhang and was back at the ridge. Acting on information that one technician was still alive, Goddard hovered over the radar site. From around the corner of the station ran Sergeant Jack Starling, torn, tattered, and overwhelmed to see an evacuation chopper. He had spent the past three hours hiding alone, fearful that nobody would return.

Moments after Starling was winched to safety, a handful of PAVN soldiers stepped from the jungle and spread across the radar site. More soldiers continued to materialise until an entire infantry company swarmed over the clearing. Relieving the Dac Cong commandos, the company picked through the scorched radar station, collecting a considerable amount of documents and electronic gear that had survived the night of grenades and morning of airstrikes. High-tech booty under arm, the infantrymen melted back into the jungle and retraced their steps off the mountain.

At the helipad, meanwhile, Captain Chamlong, not warm to the idea of keeping his men alone on top of the mountain, was screaming for an evacuation. By the early afternoon, a shuttle of HH-53s arrived and began backhauling Team Z-16 to Nakhang. There to greet Chamlong was the Headquarters 333 commander, Special Colonel Vitoon Yasawasdi. A hard-driving RTA engineering officer, Vitoon, callsigned *Dhep* (Thai for "Angel"), was in his fourth year with Headquarters 333. Confronting Chamlong, Dhep demanded that Team Z-16 return to Phou Phathi and defend the mountain. Chamlong scoffed at this and continued with the evacuation. By 1545 hours, Team Z-16 was safe at Nakhang. It was soon disbanded and its members returned to Thailand.

Of the Hmong defenders on the ridgeline, most got out during the helicopter evacuation. Some 27 others walked off the crest and trekked 40 kilometres southwest before reaching a friendly garrison.

Fallout from the defeat at Phou Phathi continued over the weeks that followed. It was a particularly stinging blow for the Hmong, and a severe loss of face for General Vang Pao. On 13 March, in what would become an increasingly familiar chorus, a delegation of Hmong chieftains met Vang Pao and requested that some Hmong refugees be lifted from Xieng Khouang to Sayaboury Province, out of harm's way. Vang Pao, mentally and physically exhausted, promising to bring up the subject with Vientiane.

Saving Face at Nakhang

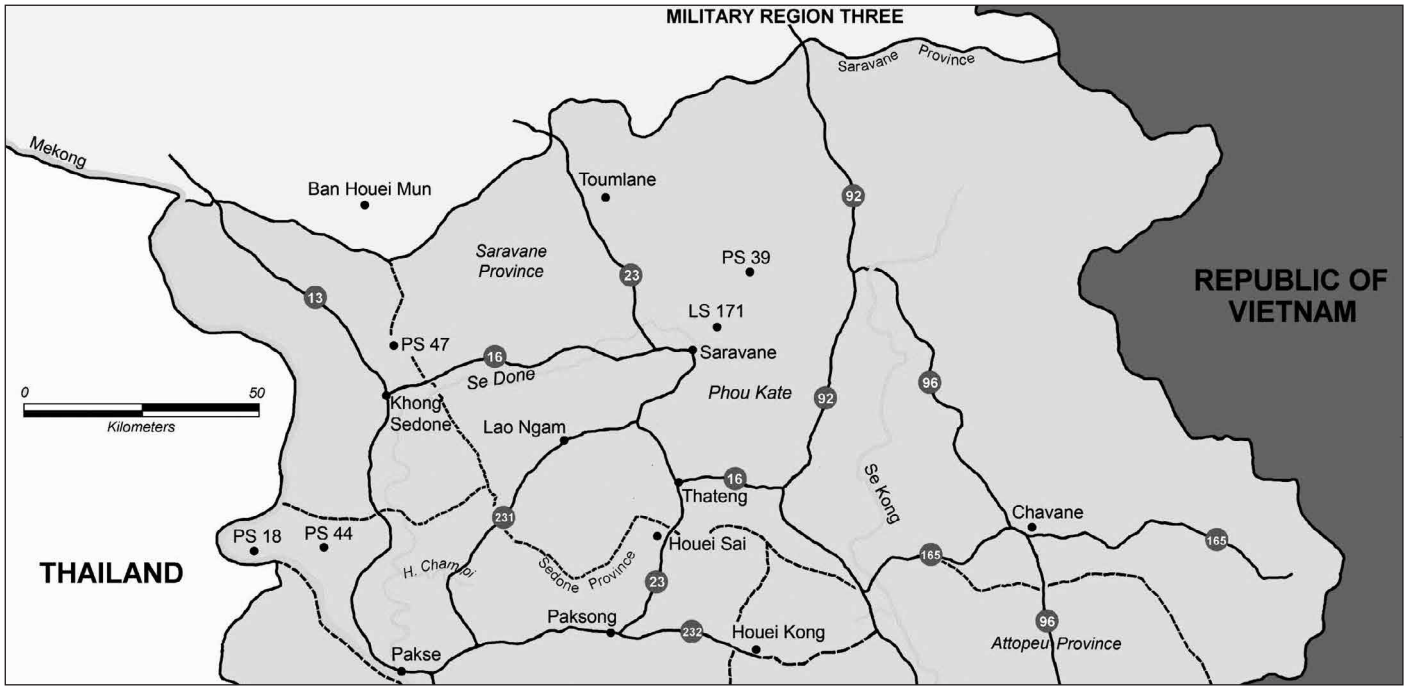
Having left Vang Pao's Sam Neua guerrilla network in tatters, PAVN rolled south down Route 6. In response, GM 21 braced itself along Nakhang's outer perimeter. Fortunately for these defenders, President Lyndon Johnson's 30 March 1968 bombing halt above the 20th Parallel did not apply to Laos. MR 2, as a result, benefited from a windfall of more than 60 U.S. combat sorties a day, many of them by assets that otherwise would have been used against North Vietnam.

Further helping Nakhang's cause, Vang Pao on the morning of 10 April launched a dry season diversion, heli-lifting irregulars under RLAF T-28 cover to Moung Son; by 1700 hours, that village was under RLG control.

While U.S. warplanes sniped at their supply lines and government forces advanced on the Moung Son front, PAVN committed four battalions – half its total in MR 2 – to encircle Nakhang during the last week of April. These forces surged forth during the pre-dawn hours of 5 May, hitting SGU lines within five kilometres of the base, as well as overrunning four FAR companies in the hills to the northwest. But since it was already late in the dry season – and perhaps remembering the beating they had taken each of the previous two years – the North Vietnamese soon ended their half-hearted grab before retreating in the face of the approaching monsoons. For the second year running, the Nakhang defenders had eyeballed PAVN and the North Vietnamese blinked first.

While pragmatically retreating at Nakhang, PAVN construction crews in fact were furiously improving roads into Sam Neua in an effort to give itself all-season logistical support. By June 1968, with monsoon rains already falling, tactical PAVN strength in northern Laos reached a peak to that date: 13,100 men, representing a 3,700-man increase over January numbers.

With the North Vietnamese playing hardball, Vang Pao responded in kind. A recruitment drive was launched, enabling Moung Cha to churn out two new paramilitary battalions, BGs 209 and 210. In the midst of this training surge, Vang Pao on 29 June



Northern Military Region 4. (Author's map)

King Sisavang Vatthana greets FAR, Thai advisors, and members of Savannakhet Unit, 1969. Gene Norwinski on right. Savannakhet Unit Chief Dick Cornish is second from right. FAR Commander Ouane Rathikoun is on the far left. MR 3 Commander Bounpone Makthepharak is second from left. (Photo courtesy Gene Norwinski)

launched his annual rainy season offensive. The general's goals were twofold: first, to find a secure location for a new TACAN in Sam Neua Province; and second, with the loss of Phou Phathi fresh in his mind, to explore the chances of retaking the ridge.

Before realising his second goal, Vang Pao knew he needed a launch site close to Phou Phathi. Moung Son, which had been seized – and lost – in April, appeared a suitable choice. Moung Son was also amidst a fertile rice-growing belt and was a leading candidate for placement of a new Sam Neua TACAN.

To retake this site, he lifted BG 201 and 250 ADC militiamen 13 kilometres to the southwest. At the same time, he landed two FAR battalions south and east of Moung Son in an effort to sever PAVN supply lines. By 9 July, despite poor weather conditions and stiff PAVN resistance, 600 irregulars pushed their way into the village.

At that point, RLG forces turned their attention east toward Phou Phathi. In support, the USAF kicked in with a generous air package, flying 292 tactical sorties over the ensuing 15 days. These strikes were assisted by a new TACAN erected at Nakhang during the month. Through August, RLG troops benefited from another 811 USAF sorties in northeastern Laos, nearly half of these strikes for Vang Pao's Sam Neua manoeuvres. Pummelled by airpower and short on supplies, PAVN eased back on its unseasonal monsoon presence.

Ripples from Tet

A wholly different war was taking place in the Lao panhandle, one closely linked to events in South Vietnam. This was readily apparent in late December 1967, when the North Vietnamese Politburo ordered PAVN to go on the offensive in southern Laos in order to create "favourable conditions." In hindsight, this directive was meant to support a massive offensive in South Vietnam timed to coincide with the Tet holiday in January 1968.

To carry out these orders, three fresh PAVN battalions arrived in MR 3 during early January. With this trio of battalions, pressure was brought to bear on Moung Phalane (which fell in February) and Thakhek (attacked but not overrun in March).

More serious was the situation in MR 4. There, elements of eight Vietnamese battalions moved against the RLG enclaves at Attopeu and Saravane. These moves threw government forces into a defensive posture, thereby limiting paramilitary strikes along the Trail and allowing the communists to seize the surrounding paddy land during the rice harvest.

Farther west, Vietnamese troops renewed pressure against the Neutralist enclave at Lao Ngam. This time, they used 140mm rockets for the first time in Laos, prompting the Neutralist garrison to flee and allowing the Pathet Lao to seize the rice harvest. Things only got worse in March, with PAVN remaining in a good position to overrun either Saravane or Attopeu with little forewarning. Communist troops also began to manoeuvre against Phou Kate, a former Pincushion base near Saravane, which since the spring of 1966 had served as a TACAN site.

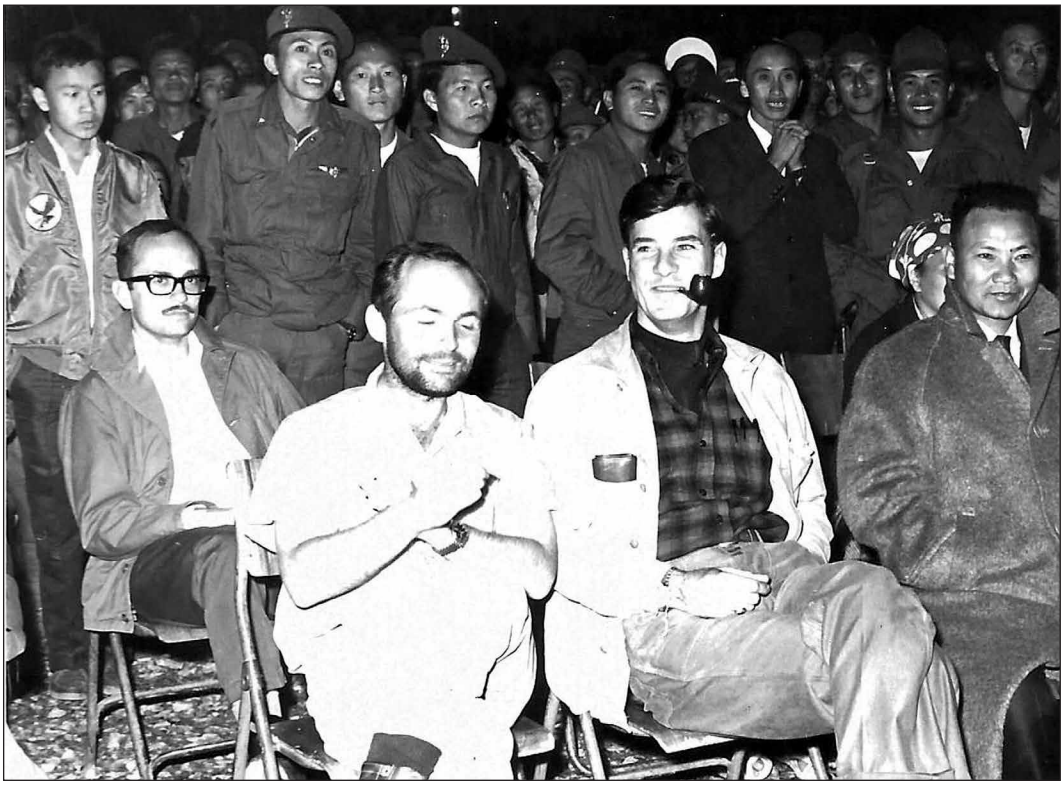
Despite its string of victories in southern Laos, Hanoi determined that PAVN had not fully carried out its December 1967 directive. Taking the heat for this perceived failure was PAVN's main unit in the panhandle, Group 565. Created in 1965, Group 565 had heretofore been a fluid organisation, containing both advisory elements to the Pathet Lao and a fluctuating number of tactical forces. In May 1968, Group 565 saw its mandate limited solely to advisory duties, while a new unit, named Group 968, took over tactical operations in south Laos.

With the battle-hardened 9th Regiment as its nucleus, Group 968 was directed to conduct operations through the summer of 1968 in order to wear down the RLG, help the Pathet Lao liberate and hold terrain, and expand the Trail corridor.

Despite this call to action, PAVN's rainy season campaign in the south proved to be a muted affair. Aside from infrequent sniping around Attopeu and Saravane, neither of these bases was seriously threatened. And the weak communist hold around Lao Ngam was maintained only because the MR 4 commander, General Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi, continued to manufacture excuses for not launching an operation to retake the lost territory.

Equally meek were PAVN forces in MR 3. Looking to seize the initiative, the CIA's Savannakhet Unit offered use of its 1st SGU Battalion to retake Moung Phalane. On 6 August, the irregulars boarded choppers and were shuttled 35 kilometres northeast of their target. The battalion then moved into Moung Phalane against little opposition, giving the RLG its first major victory in a year.

During a subsequent sweep in the vicinity, the irregulars stumbled across a communist supply depot filled with farming implements and rifles. The ground situation being tranquil, Air America Captain Ed Reid and Co-Captain William Hudson headed east on 13 August with a Bell full of rice for the troops. Joining them was the battalion's advisor, Wayne McNulty (who had transferred from MR 4 to the MR 3 SGU program) and the SGU battalion's deputy commander, Captain Khao Insisiengmay, a former paratrooper.



Long Tieng Unit Chief Jon Randall flanked by his deputy, Howard "Singha" Freeman, and Major General Vang Pao, circa 1968. (Photo courtesy Jane Randall)

Vientiane Station Chief Ted Shackley reviews Hmong honour guard at Long Tieng, summer 1968. Behind him is the incoming CIA station chief, Lawrence Devlin. Military Region 2 Commander Vang Pao (in uniform) is on the left. (Photo courtesy Jane Randall)

As the Bell settled in a clearing, Khao and McNulty got out to consult a map while some rice sacks were offloaded to a cluster of guerrillas. Without warning, bullets started pelting the chopper. McNulty jumped back in and was leaning out from behind the remaining rice sacks when an enemy round hit his forehead and went out the top of the cabin.

As Reid landed at Savannakhet, McNulty was whisked to a waiting Porter and rushed to medical facilities at Nakhon Phanom. The head injury proved fatal, making McNulty the fifth CIA officer to die in Laos and the first to be killed by communist gunfire.

Cauldrons of Boiling Pigfat

It was a well-rested Vang Pao that arrived back in Long Tieng on 20 October, fresh from a month-long tour of France and the United States with Hog Daniels. The trip had been meant as therapy for the general, coming off the spring loss at Phou Phathi and the seesaw skirmishes of the summer.

With the rains ending and the weather turning more favourable for PAVN, however, Vang Pao had little reason for optimism. His Hmong army was exhausted. Over the preceding year, they had been the most active military force in the RLG's order of battle, accounting for 71 percent of enemy troops killed. This success had come with a heavy price: SGUs represented 59 percent of all friendly forces killed since December 1967.

The net result was a major influx of younger, less disciplined Hmong recruits to fill the depleted ranks. Worse for Vang Pao, with the start of Paris peace talks between representatives from Washington and Hanoi, U.S. analysts were predicting that the communists might attempt a land grab in Laos for eventual political bargaining.

This gloomy forecast came as PAVN was entering the dry season already deployed deep inside Sam Neua. As of early October, Moung Son was back in communist hands, Phou Phathi was still held by PAVN, two North Vietnamese battalions were stalking the bush around Nakhang, and a Pathet Lao battalion occupied nearby Houei Thom. Concentrated around the Sam Neua provincial capital itself were more communist combatants (16 battalions' worth) and more equipment than anywhere in Indochina outside of North Vietnam.

Because of this strong communist foothold in MR 2 going into the dry season, Vang Pao drew up plans for a 1 November offensive designed to throw PAVN off balance. The operation, estimated at slightly longer than one week in duration, called for government forces to relieve pressure on Houei Hinsa and Nakhang by deploying in a forward arc from these two sites, then sweeping east across Route 6.

As the 1 November launch date approached, logistical difficulties prompted Vang Pao to push back the start of his operation by one week. Then, when government forces belatedly began their advance, poor weather and stiff communist pressure kept progress to a minimum. Not until the third week of November did Hmong

troops, preceded by heavy air support, start to pick up speed.

At that point, Vang Pao expanded his manoeuvre into a full-blown dry season offensive. The new operation – named Pigfat, a cheeky reference to cauldrons of boiling pigfat to be dumped on the heads of PAVN like from a medieval castle – was aimed at retaking Phou Phathi; short of that, its goal was to disrupt PAVN dry season intentions toward Nakhang. An equally important outcome was to evacuate the thousands of Hmong villagers who had been left behind after the rapid evacuation from Phou Phathi.

Vang Pao with Colonel Youa Vang Ly (right) and CIA reports officer Richard "Igor" Kustra on the first day of Operation Pigfat, December 1968. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)

Hearing of Vang Pao's unprecedented plan for a dry season offensive, both Washington and Vientiane Station were initially leery. Long Tieng Unit, however, argued that Vang Pao's reputation among his people would be irreparably harmed if he did not make an attempt to retake the mountain or, more importantly, properly evacuate the Hmong. They were supported by the 4802nd JLD in Udorn, now under the command of Pat Landry after Bill Lair gave up his seat during mid-year for a sabbatical at the U.S. Army War College.

Eventually, Long Tieng Unit carried the day – with the proviso that the USAF would only provide a five-day sortie surge. Spearheading the operation would be the three battalions of GM 21, each under the personal direction of Vang Pao. Loading aboard Pony Express CH-3Es, they were shuttled to Houei Hinsa. According to the general's original Pigfat scenario, these battalions were then to divide into four columns and hit Phou Phathi from all sides.

On 26 November, Pigfat was scheduled to start. USAF and Air America transports that morning began converging on Long Tieng and other forward marshalling areas. As this activity was going on, Vang Pao arrived at Houei Hinsa and curtly informed Chief of Unit Jon Randall that the operation had to be postponed a week due to an ominous dream he had the night before.

As word of Vang Pao's announcement was passed back to Vientiane and Washington, it was answered with a wave of negativity. The financial losses incurred, not to mention the seemingly arbitrary nature of Vang Pao's decision, led them to unanimously call for Pigfat's outright cancellation.

Back at Long Tieng Unit, the CIA case officers did not take this news well. Randall immediately flew down to Vientiane for a round of intense lobbying. Howard Freeman, who had been promoted to Randall's deputy, took a different tack. Taking pen to paper, he crafted a hard-hitting cable that went out late that night. It concluded with a threat to walk off the job if the Pigfat postponement was not approved.

Down in Vientiane, Lawrence Devlin, who had arrived in August as the new station chief, was furious with Freeman's ultimatum and demanded his expulsion. Interceding on Freeman's behalf, Landry conjured all of his diplomatic tact to cool temperatures. In the end, Freeman stayed and Pigfat won a week's reprieve.

Seven days on, the operation restarted and the SGU columns – with the exception of the western one – started to show good progress. By 6 December, the western column, too, got its act together and pushed into a village six kilometres southwest of Phou Phathi.

As this was taking place, some 10,000 refugees flooded into Houei Hinsa and were evacuated to holding camps in the rear. Further complicating matters, PAVN mortar rounds began raining down from the southern tip of Phou Phathi. In response, a pair of 105mm howitzers were airlifted in to offer counterfire. RLAF and U.S. aircraft also chimed in, blanketing Phou Phathi with bombs, rockets, and napalm.

On 7 December airpower pounded the southern face of Phou Phathi for the second day running. By that time, however, the promised USAF surge had long since expired, cutting sharply into U.S. sorties destined for northeastern Laos.

Realising that he had to make his final assault before Vietnamese reinforcements could arrive during the drop in airstrikes, Vang Pao told the southern column to begin climbing Phou Phathi's southeastern slope by the following day. As ordered, the Hmong worked their way onto the narrow mountain trail leading up the face of the ridge. There they clung for 24 hours until PAVN 12.7mm machine gun fire from atop the summit forced them back to the valley floor. Although howitzer rounds were able to silence the Vietnamese machine gun, the irregulars were unable to regain their toehold.

By the time Pigfat entered its third week, Vang Pao was in a quandary. On the one hand, a PAVN defector claimed his former comrades on the ridge openly questioned their ability to continue holding. On the other hand, the Hmong general was not confident his men could cut the flow of communist supplies flowing west along Route 602. Compounding matters, an 82mm mortar and another 12.7mm machine gun had begun firing from the summit.

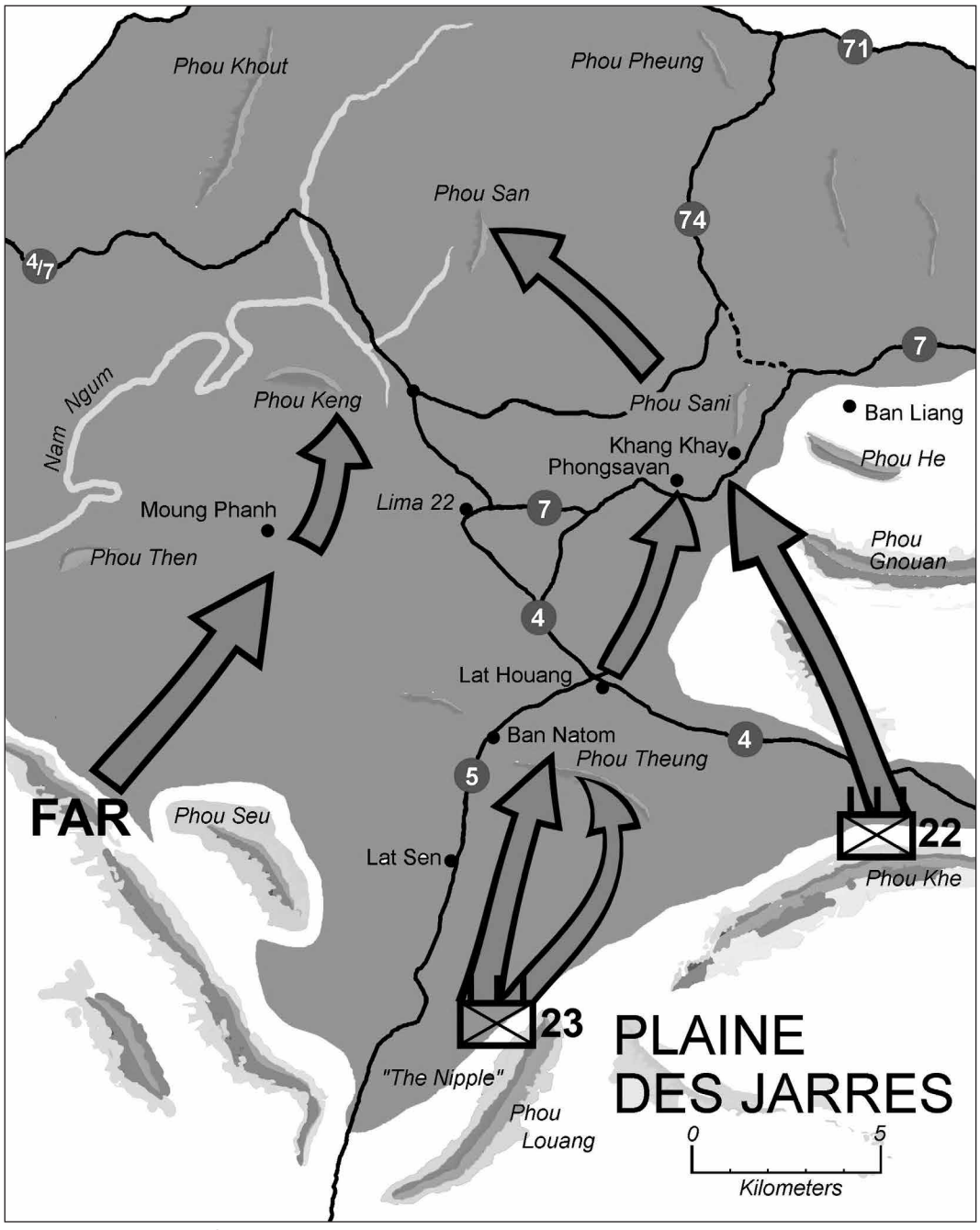
For the remainder of the month, the stalemate continued. Airpower savaged the summit, but diehard PAVN defenders still kept the Hmong stuck near the base of the ridge. Though Vang Pao made plans for a renewed effort to begin on 3 January 1969,

that launch date came and went without the irregulars making any headway. Two days later, the 148th Regiment arrived at Phou Phathi, battered from airstrikes but nevertheless significantly boosting the communist presence around the ridge and all but sealing the fate of Pigfat.

In an 11th-hour bid to shift the tide of battle back in favour of the RLG, the USAF dispatched fighter-bombers armed with Bullpup air-to-ground missiles. Because of the Bullpup's less-than-perfect accuracy, their use was normally prohibited anywhere near friendly forces. But given the gravity of the Phou Phathi situation, an exception was made. Predictably, one rocket went wide and inflicted casualties on Hmong troops. On that sour note, Vang Pao on 7 January reluctantly ended Pigfat.

Although PAVN had suffered hundreds of dead defending the ridge, Hmong losses – 200 casualties among the three battalions – promised to be far harder to replace given the scarcity of eligible males in MR 2. That, coupled with the other physical and psychological blows inflicted on government forces in 1968, had made for a year best forgotten.

5
BACK AGAINST THE WALL



Operation Kou Kiet. (Author's map)

In retrospect, late 1968 was a key watershed moment in the war. PAVN that year discarded nearly all vestiges of its Pathet Lao fig leaf and displayed unprecedented determination in maintaining military pressure against the RLG. Such intensity had paid off. Having soundly defeated Vang Pao in Pigfat, PAVN was entering the new calendar year on its best footing yet.

Sure to suffer in the opening weeks of 1969 were the remaining RLG pockets in central Sam Neua. Anticipating this, Vang Pao faced the immediate dilemma of what to do about the 10,000-strong refugee community that had been forming at Houei Hinsa. At the time, however, the general, depressed over the outcome of Pigfat, was sulking at Long Tieng.

To break his gloom, Vang Pao was enticed to venture to Moung Cha to review training of the latest BG – only to find that the average age of recruits was barely above 16. Though still dejected, Vang Pao composed himself enough to forge plans for a grand defensive arc extending from Houei Tong Ko, to Moung Hiem, to Nakhang.

Implementing Vang Pao's plan, Pony Express CH-3Es flew 539 sorties between 10 and 15 January, shuttling more than half the Houei Hinsa

population west to Houei Tong Ko; the remainder were to make the journey on foot. At the same time, while working out plans for the reoccupation of Moung Hiem, Vang Pao began rotating some of his Nakhang irregulars back to Long Tieng for a short breather.

Before the general's scheme could be further implemented, PAVN opened its dry season offensive across northern Laos. Simultaneous probes were launched at outposts across Xieng Khouang. The most devastating attack was reserved for Moung Soui. Ever since 1966, Moung Soui – which hosted both a Neutralist garrison and a Thai firebase – had loomed high on the communist hitlist. Twice before – in February 1967 and again in April 1968 – PAVN commandos had tried to penetrate the garrison; both times they came up short.

Communist displeasure with Moung Soui had deepened further on the last night of 1968 when the Thai SR troops (stationed at Ban Khay, three kilometres to the northeast) towed a pair of its 155mm howitzers east and put a wealth of PDJ targets under fire. Copying this tactic, at the close of January 1969 the Neutralists attached four 105mm howitzers to trucks and dragged them closer to the plain.

In response to these provocations, on the evening of 10 February North Vietnamese commandos raided Moung Soui for the third time. Eleven Neutralists and one U.S. Army advisor were killed, bringing to an end the artillery harassment.

Robert Burr Smith – who earned the callsign Mister Clean because of his shaved head – arrived in Laos in December 1966 and was assigned as an advisor to the Pha Khao interrogation centre. In 1968, he was reassigned as Vang Pao's personal case officer. Here he is with Hmong SGU in 1969. (Photo courtesy Cynthia S. Finn)

In his late teens, Burr Smith had been an NCO with the famed Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division during the Second World War. He parachuted into Normandy on D-Day and was wounded in Carentan, France, and Foy, Belgium. Ever the paratrooper, he did not miss opportunities to jump – here with PARU commandos – while at Long Tieng. (Photo courtesy Cynthia S. Finn)

Not willing to let the communists dictate the fight, Vang Pao took several steps in the wake of the Moung Soui attack. First, he delayed his planned retake of Moung Hiem and instead kept four irregular battalions around the Hmong heartland southwest of the PDJ. Second, he started moving some of the refugees from Houei Tong Ko southwest to safer positions on the other side of the Luang Prabang provincial border around Phu Cum. Third, he committed one FAR battalion and elements of three irregular battalions to an ongoing clearing operation south of the PDJ. Finally, he gained from MR 4's General Phasouk a tentative commitment for the loan of 700 southern troops.

Despite these efforts, Vang Pao's defensive arrangement going into the height of the dry season remained weak. Especially tenuous was the RLG foothold in northern MR 2. The centrepiece in this area was Nakhang, garrisoned by a FAR battalion, an irregular battalion, a five-man PARU detachment named Team Z-15, and five

CIA officers Robert "Watts" Shires (dark shirt and pants, left) and Bob Gallardo (checkered shirt) issue M16 rifles to Hmong SGU at Bouamlong ahead of Operation Kou Kiet, 1969. (Photo courtesy Robert Shires)

CIA officer Robert "Watts" Shires instructs Hmong guerrillas at Bouamlong in the use of the M16 rifle just prior to Operation Kou Kiet, 1969. Shires replaced Bag Odom in 1968 as the CIA advisor at Bouamlong. (Photo courtesy Robert Shires)

Thai road-watchers. Parts of two other FAR battalions held satellite outposts to the southwest and southeast.

Though less than impressive on paper, Vang Pao was banking that the Nakhang defenders could best PAVN for the third year running. The U.S. embassy had even given rare permission to use defoliants to strip foliage away from the treeline and had been dropping so much ordnance around the base that in February the expanded air support was considered excessive and some was redirected to alternate targets.

These efforts, in the end, still proved insufficient. On 28 February, the 174th Regiment converged on the site. Having already tried a multitude of attack strategies – and always sustaining heavy casualties – the Vietnamese this time opted for the most obvious avenue of approach: directly through the new growth of elephant grass that had sprung up along the perimeter. Blitzing the defenders, PAVN was able to seize the area around the TACAN at the cost of only 26 killed.

As the North Vietnamese pushed home their attack, the FAR base commander pleaded for assistance. Immediately, A-26 bombers began conducting daylight strikes, while an AC-130 gunship – making its debut in northern Laos – poured rounds from four side-firing cannons and miniguns. Pony Express CH-3Es also showed, evacuating some of Nakhang's civilian dependents.

Meanwhile, Vang Pao selected a battalion of Hmong guerrilla reinforcements for insertion the following day, while the USAF approved a major tactical air support package for imminent implementation. Before the reinforcements or additional air support arrived, PAVN troops set up a 12.7mm machine gun on the runway and began pelting the shrinking RLG compound. Killed in the crossfire was the FAR base commander and nearly all his fellow officers.

Early on the morning of 2 March, the survivors attempted a breakout to the west. Normally, PAVN refrained from harassing withdrawal columns, abiding by an unspoken agreement whereby Lao troops were allowed to melt away without having to resort to stiff, protracted defensive actions. This time – perhaps recalling the beatings they had taken at Nakhang in previous years – the Vietnamese offered no respite, mauling the RLG troops as they turned tail.

In the days after Nakhang fell, Vang Pao considered, then cancelled, plans to retake the base, opting instead to conserve his troops to fight another day. With that decision, the USAF moved in and levelled the site. The loss had been costly. Gone was the RLG's symbolic civilian administration for Sam Neua. Gone was the TACAN and the bulk of the FAR troops in the vicinity. Too, all but 143 men from the resident irregular battalion managed to regroup.

Worse, the Thai, sensitive to casualties in Laos, had lost an unprecedented number of personnel. Of the two Thai road-watchers at the base (three others were on leave), both were missing and presumed killed. Worse, all of PARU's Team Z-15 was captured, with only one member ultimately repatriated from Hanoi in 1974.

Redeem Honor

With the loss of Nakhang, the RLG's next major fallback position in northern MR 2 was Bouamlong, an old Momentum base northeast of the PDJ. To provide paramilitary support, Hog and Bag moved in during early March. Arriving on their heels were elements of the PAVN 148th Regiment, which began applying heavy pressure by the second week of the month. In response, two USAF AC-47 Spooky

gunships were deployed on 12 March; two more gunships were added three days later. Five days after that, three Spookys inflicted an estimated 175 communist casualties during PAVN's heaviest attack against the mountain garrison to date.

Following this successful defence, attention shifted to the PDJ. There, one of the idiosyncrasies of the war in Laos was readily apparent. Although it was brimming with communist targets, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had enforced bombing restrictions that allowed the RLG's enemies to entrench themselves on the plain with little fear of bombardment. A case in point was the town of Khang Khay, which contained not only a Pathet Lao administrative headquarters, but also a Chinese Economic and Cultural Mission, a PAVN garrison, radio facilities, a POW camp, and assorted communist arms depots.

Thai forward air guide (FAG) Somchai "Python" Tankulsawat (far right) and CIA officer Chuck "Whitetop" Campbell watch Hmong guerrillas board an Air America DHC-4 Caribou during the opening phase of Operation Kou Kiet. Python would later change his radio callsign to "Small Man" and serve as the senior FAG for the Unity program. (Author's collection)

Only after the loss of Nakhang – with Vang Pao's back against the wall and Vientiane in a funk – did Souvanna Phouma and Ambassador Sullivan, by then in his final two weeks as head of the U.S. mission, have a change of heart and slash several of the restrictions that had for so long exempted the plain from aerial attack. Seizing upon this easing of the rules, the USAF approved a major pre-monsoon bombing campaign for northern Laos – aptly named Raindance – specifically timed to coincide with a late dry season spoiling foray around the PDJ that Vang Pao was concocting for mid-March.

On 17 March, the first Raindance sorties were staged. Set at 80 strikes a day for the next 12 days, towns like Khang Khay, Phongsavan, and Xieng Khouangville were suddenly fair game. Coinciding with the bombing, Vang Pao took his cue and surged south of the PDJ. By 30 March, one of his irregular battalions walked to Phou Khe, a mountain overlooking Xieng Khouangville from the southwest. From there, the Hmong staged probes toward the southeastern PDJ and onto Route 4. Along Route 7, meanwhile, guerrillas began sniping at communist resupply traffic.

In the air, Raindance was extended through 7 April. By the time that deadline was reached, 730 USAF and T-28 sorties had reportedly accounted for a total of 1,512 storage structures destroyed or damaged. The campaign had also diverted communist attention around the PDJ, allowing the Neutralists to expand their holdings in the mountains surrounding Moung Soui.

Even more important, Vang Pao had his faith restored in the marriage of tactical airpower and his paramilitary forces. With USAF strikes set to continue at 50 a day, the Hmong general contemplated more ambitious manoeuvres. First, his troops pressed back into the rice-rich Moung Ngan valley. Next, in an attempt to wrest control of a major communist-held town, he gave the order to move on Xieng Khouangville.

Vang Pao's operation against Xieng Khouangville was to benefit from several factors. First, the USAF had thoroughly pummelled the target, leaving behind wisps of smoke and a very weary band of defenders. Second, Air America H-34s had airlifted a 105mm howitzer from Padong to a clearing on Phou Khe. From there, artillery rounds began to flatten what little had been left standing in the town. Lastly, the FAR General Staff had heeded Vang Pao's calls for assistance and dispatched a crack battalion of airborne infantry for a combat stint in MR 2.

Flown to Long Tieng, the paratroopers shuttled to Padong, then were lifted on 4 April to join the Hmong guerrillas atop Phou Khe. On 29 April, the combined Hmong/paratrooper task force walked off Phou Khe and into the deserted Xieng Khouangville valley. Despite the devastation that had been wrought by bombs and artillery shells, the troops uncovered 18 trucks, two BTR-40 armoured cars, a dozen 37mm anti-aircraft guns, and one 75mm howitzer. CH-54 Skycrane heavy-lift choppers were dispatched to sling out the guns; most of the vehicles were stuffed with ammunition and destroyed.

Meanwhile, the guerrillas ventured to nearby Tham Kap, a cave complex north of Route 4 long rumoured to be a major communist depot. Once uncovered by the Hmong guerrillas, Tham Kap was found to hold some 300 tons of medical supplies, including medicine from such far away sources as Iraq. In one chamber were three-tier hospital beds sufficient for an estimated 1,000 patients. Other chambers served as operating rooms, with one containing a pair of X-ray machines.

Vang Pao did not have long to celebrate his hold over Xieng Khouangville. Within two weeks, road-watchers were reporting heavy westbound traffic onto the PDJ, with communist build-ups reported both northeast and south of the captured town. Early on 21 May, elements of the PAVN 174th Regiment, supported by Pathet Lao troops, smashed the guerrilla elements holding Phou Khe. The Hmong fell back, spiking their howitzer before leaving. As Xieng Khouangville came under attack the following day, paratroopers left one company inside the town and attempted to retake Phou Khe. Twenty-four hours later, communist troops overran the lone

CIA officer Chuck Campbell with Vang Pao as Operation Kou Kiet roll across the PDJ, September 1969. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)

airborne company in Xieng Khouangville, then batted back the RLG troops on the slopes of Phou Khe. Laden with 200 casualties, the airborne battalion was returned to MR 3.

At the same time that Vang Pao was giving ground at Xieng Khouangville, the USAF was preparing a second air support package designed to choke communist resupply routes onto the PDJ. Named Stranglehold, the five-day campaign kicked off on 22 May and focused on both Routes 6 and 7.

As with Raindance, Vang Pao used Stranglehold as his cue to stab at Route 7. In coordinated efforts, guerrillas from Bouamlong moved south against the Route 7/71 road junction near the village of Nong Pet, while other guerrillas from the vicinity of San Tiau hit the Ban Ban valley.

Once Stranglehold concluded, the USAF promised to continue with a generous sortie package for northern Laos. To take advantage, Vang Pao planned for his annual rainy season offensive to begin during the second half of June. Because the RLG hold over Sam Neua was in tatters, his focus was to be exclusively within Xieng Khouang. Specifically, he planned for a trio of harassment actions around the periphery of the PDJ.

By the end of the third week of June, Vang Pao's rainy season operation was fast approaching its scheduled launch date. At that point, PAVN confounded plans with a pre-emptive strike toward Moung Soui. What's more, the North Vietnamese committed 10 PT-76 amphibious tanks to the battle, marking the first combat operation by communist armour in northern Laos. Supported by artillery and a commando battalion, tank-led PAVN infantry sliced effortlessly through the Neutralist front lines near Moung Soui during the pre-dawn hours of 24 June, scattering the spooked defenders.

Rolling west, Vietnamese armour and artillery quickly closed on Ban Khay. The eighth rotation of Thai artillerymen – appropriately callsigned SR 8 – had just finished its tour and were packed to rotate home. Before that could happen, their entire 105mm battery was destroyed that night, while a friendly airstrike accidently hit one of their 155mm howitzers.

Shortly before noon the following day, Dhep, the Headquarters 333 commander who by then was sporting the stars of an RTA major general, took an L-19 into the SR base. Spewing commands, he had a handful of Thai casualties airlifted out and the last operable SR howitzers – reduced to just two 155s – readied to confront a renewed PAVN attack.

As night fell over Moung Soui, USAF gunships kept the Vietnamese at bay. The situation remained calm for the next 24 hours, only to deteriorate rapidly on the morning of 26 June. Exacerbating the situation was a decision to evacuate all dependents, prompting a wider Neutralist exodus.

Alone, SR 8 was on hand as the recently arrived 41st Dac Cong Battalion (whose commandos had led the deadly assault on Phou Phathi the previous year) and troops from the 165th Regiment circled behind Ban Khay and assumed blocking positions to the west. At the same time, PAVN tank and artillery rounds began to hit the Thai compound with greater frequency.

With the situation fast deteriorating, General Paitoon Inkatanawat – the Thai prime minister's influential aide who had been hovering in and around Laos since the late 1950s – choppered to the base for consultations, as did several senior FAR officers from Vientiane. Though water and ammunition were airdropped that afternoon, a consensus was building that the defence of Ban Khay had grown untenable.

Following a night of heavy incoming, a thick fog settled over the SR 8 encampment on the morning of 27 June. Gathering for a dawn conference, four remaining U.S. Army advisors sat down with Dhep and the SR battalion officers. When an evacuation was suggested for later in the afternoon, Dhep grew livid, insisting that his men would not give ground. In the end, however, the Headquarters 333 chief was overruled by Vientiane. Accordingly, Operation Swan Lake – the evacuation of Ban Khay – began at 1445 hours. Shortly before sundown, with the weather worsening, Dhep was on the last chopper to leave.

Significantly, the communist occupation of Moung Soui fully redefined the seasonal nature of the war in northern Laos. Until 1968, PAVN limited its monsoon activities largely to company-sized probes and defensive operations. By June 1969, however, Hanoi felt itself capable of not only holding virtually all of Sam Neua, but also pushing deep into Xieng Khouang. Part of their assertiveness was due to better logistics, with most supplies destined for the PDJ now going directly west from the North Vietnamese border along both Route 7 and the new Route 72 (the latter, scheduled for completion later that summer, ran from Nong Het to Xieng Khouangville).

For his part, Vang Pao refused to concede the monsoon initiative to PAVN and on 28 June – the day after Moung Soui's evacuation – presented an updated proposal for a limited rainy season drive. Named Operation Off Balance and set to start 1 July, it was envisioned as a Neutralist/SGU/FAR pincer aimed at retaking Moung Soui within 10 days.

On 1 July, Off Balance kicked off on schedule. A FAR parachute battalion was choppered to Ban Na and began walking northwest. A Hmong BG was lifted to San Luang – an old Momentum camp – and headed northeast. A Neutralist battalion then moved east from Xieng Dat to link up with the Hmong. For the other half of the pincer, another Hmong battalion and Neutralist battalion were lifted northeast of Moung Soui and started south.

Despite initial progress, within four days Off Balance had ground to a halt when the Neutralists refused to budge. In addition, poor weather limited air support. The Hmong and paratroopers thus went at it alone, advancing into the hills just south of their target. Still, an estimated two North Vietnamese battalions remained between them and Moung Soui as Off Balance reached its intended 10 July deadline.

Marching across the PDJ during Operation Kou Kiet. On the right are Burr Smith, reports officer Steve Murchison, and Long Tieng Unit Chief Tom Clines. Because of the dynamic situation in MR 2, Long Tieng Unit was assigned two reports officers that were deployed to the frontlines. (Photo courtesy Cynthia S. Finn)

MR 4 Commander Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi (left) greets General Vang Pao as he and Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh arrive at Long Tieng on an Air America Beech Baron to observe the gains during Operation Kou Kiet, 1969. (Author's collection)

The following day, the retaking of Moung Soui grew more costly for Vang Pao. Three weeks earlier, a second contingent of Hmong T-28 pilots had graduated Udorn training and returned to MR 2. There they joined their single surviving Hmong predecessor, Captain Ly Lu, who over the previous 18 months of flying had become legendary by chalking up nearly 1,000 sorties and flying up to a dozen missions a day. On 11 July, as the Hmong ace took to the skies in support of Off Balance, PAVN gunners found their mark. With Vang Pao watching, Ly Lu's plane caught fire and went into a power dive. A portion of his remains was later recovered and taken to Long Tieng for burial.

Four days after Ly Lu's death, Vang Pao reluctantly aborted Off Balance. Both Hmong battalions withdrew to Long Tieng, while the FAR airborne troops choppered to Ban Na for static defence. On 7 August, all Neutralist troops in the vicinity were ordered to prepare for an airlift to safer climes at Moung Kassy.

As Off Balance was fizzling to a halt, the USAF launched a concentrated interdiction program designed to stem communist supplies passing along Route 7 through Ban Ban. Using time-delay and area-denial munitions, the aerial campaign forced the Vietnamese off the main road, significantly reducing the amount of war material that could be moved onto

the PDJ. This, combined with a record amount of rain in July, bit sharply into the communist logistical flow.

Despite this good news, Vang Pao had little reason to cheer. Morale was low among his troops, and PAVN remained deployed in forward positions. Given the need to retain forces to protect the Hmong heartland southwest of the PDJ, the only possible rainy season offensive he could muster was another harassment effort against Route 7 near Nong Pet. In doing so, the general hoped to draw off PAVN troops from the plain, much as his diversion at Xieng Khouangville in May had diverted North Vietnamese troops from other fronts.

MR 4 delegation led by General Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi (face visible, fifth from right) arrives on the PDJ to observe the gains seized during Operation Kou Kiet, 1969. Vang Pao is on the left. Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh (back to camera) wears a South Vietnamese Ranger insignia on his shoulder, which was also adopted by MR 4 SGU. (Author's collection)

MR 4 Commander Phasouk Somly Rasphakdi walks along the L22 airfield on the central PDJ after it was seized during Operation Kou Kiet, 1969. Pakse Unit Chief Len Gmirkin is on the right. Headquarters 333 Deputy Chief Dhon is second from right. (Author's collection)

As originally conceived in late July, Vang Pao's Route 7 diversion called for one FAR and one SGU battalion to be choppered near Phou Nok Kok ("Woodpecker Mountain"), the ridgeline overlooking Nong Pet from the northeast. To this, the general soon added a second phase calling for five irregular and three FAR battalions to seize control of Phou Theung, the dominant hill feature on the southeastern PDJ, and Phou Seu, a key mountain overlooking the southwestern plain.

Vang Pao's ability to accomplish his second phase was rated as questionable by his CIA advisors, and he was counselled against it by both the embassy and the prime minister. Ignoring such advice, Vang Pao insisted that his spoiling campaign begin on 3 August. Dubbed Operation About Face by Long Tieng Unit, Vang Pao gave his upcoming campaign a Lao name: *Kou Kiet*, which translated, appropriately, to "Redeem Honor."

As the final planning for Kou Kiet took shape, a call went out to other military regions for assistance. From MR 3, Savannakhet Unit offered an SGU battalion (callsigned Blue Battalion) on a two-month loan. MR 4's General Phasouk, while earlier receptive to the idea of lending a battalion to Vang Pao, was now convinced that the Hmong general would butcher any unit. Finally, after much lobbying by Pakse Unit, Phasouk reluctantly offered up his region's 2nd SGU Battalion from PS 38. These were the first two instances of an SGU battalion being loaned to another MR.

With the help of these two southern guerrilla battalions, Kou Kiet's first phase was reworked into a pincer by two task forces. Blue Battalion, lifted by chopper to Bouamlong, was to join with local ADC and walk south toward the Nong Pet road-fork. From the southeast, Pakse's 2nd SGU Battalion, along with some FAR and ADC, would head for Phou Nok Kok.

Manoeuvring for a linkup, the two task forces would be able to squeeze Route 7 shut. In doing so, Vang Pao was looking to exacerbate what already were critical supply shortages for communist forces on the PDJ. From road-watch and pilot sightings, the Hmong general and his CIA advisors by early August had an inkling of PAVN's chronic logistical woes. Moreover, reports were reaching Long Tieng of malaria, dysentery, and starvation sweeping the communist ranks.

After a three-day weather delay, Kou Kiet kicked off on 6 August. Fighting torrential rains, the southern task force slowly moved off its launch site toward Phou Nok Kok. Joining for the trek was case officer James "Swamprat" Adkins and PARU Team Z-23, plus Pakse case officer Mickey Kappes.

Facing the same rains, the northern task force, escorted by case officer Bag Odom, remained mired near Bouamlong. Not until the end of the second week of August did the weather sufficiently

improve for the Bouamlong prong to be heli-lifted into the hills above Nong Pet.

On 19 August, the southern column took the Phou Nok Kok summit; a 75mm pack howitzer was soon lifted to the ridge for support. Four days later, the Bouamlong task force moved within eight kilometres of Nong Pet.

As good news filtered in from the field, Vang Pao for the first time in months had reason for optimism. With the USAF pounding PAVN supply routes and providing close air support at an astounding 145 sorties a day, road-watchers and sensors revealed not a single truck had entered the PDJ since early August. This was confirmed by the troops converging on Nong Pet, who were armed with 3.5-inch rocket launchers but had yet to encounter any vehicular targets.

Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh with Hmong guerrillas atop a captured PAVN GAZ-51 truck on the PDJ during Operation Kou Kiet, 1969. (Author's collection)

Heartened, Vang Pao on 20 August launched the second phase of Kou Kiet. Responsibilities were divided, with an all-FAR task force set to move northeast from Ban Na toward Moung Phanh, while Hmong paramilitary battalions hit the plain from the south. Spearheading the Hmong irregulars was Lt. Colonel Chong Shoua Yang's newly formed GM 22. Marching alongside them would be four CIA officers, two Thai civilian forward air guides (FAGs), and a PARU commando. Behind GM 22 would be another new Hmong regiment, Major Vang Sing Vang's GM 23. A large portion of all these Kou Kiet forces, FAR as well as irregulars, were reequipped with M16 rifles, shipments of which had started arriving in mid-June.

On 20 August, GM 22 choppered from Phou Phasai to the next ridge northeast. From there, the regiment began an uneventful five-day walk through a series of foothills to the Nipple, the nickname for the protuberance of marshy lowlands that jutted off the southern end of the PDJ. Slogging up the muddy Nipple, the regiment split. Half continued plodding north through the lowlands. Accompanying them was Chuck Campbell, the CIA advisor who earlier had worked with the Lao Theung ADC of FG/E. Alongside Campbell was a single PARU advisor and a Thai forward air guide using the callsign

Hmong SGU ride atop a captured PAVN PT-76 amphibious tank on the PDJ, September 1969. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)

Python. Another case officer, Robert Burr Smith, 45, had joined the GM 22 troops for a time, but soon had to be evacuated with malaria and a bleeding ulcer. This column made fast progress, moving with little problem into the village of Lat Sen.

The second GM 22 column shifted east and walked north along the Phou Louang ridgeline toward Phou Theung. Advising this column were two case officers: Robert Gallardo, a former Special Forces lieutenant colonel who for the previous year had overseen operations south of the PDJ; and James "Alabama" Monroe, 26, an ex-Special Forces reservist from the Alabama National Guard who since September 1968 had spent time with Savannakhet's road-watch program and at the Pha Khao interrogation centre.

By month's end, GM 22 reunited at the Route 4-5 junction near Lat Houang. There the meadows were filled with abandoned horses and cows, making for lavish feasts over the days ahead. Simultaneously, FAR troops converged on the western edge of the plain. As communist forces fast melted into the hills east of the PDJ, the USAF on 31 August looked to deliver a coup de grace with a defoliant-spraying operation. Using five UC-123Ks staging from Udorn, sorties were flown over the next seven days in an effort to destroy communist rice fields in and around the plain.

Back on the ground, with thousands of Hmong guerrillas and FAR soldiers walking side by side across the plain, it was quickly becoming apparent that Vang Pao and his CIA advisors had badly misread PAVN intentions. Instead of reverting to static defensive warfare, most of the North Vietnamese had vanished without a fight. Moreover, one PAVN prisoner captured near Moung Soui confided that no offensive action was planned until reinforcements could arrive the following dry season.

Having expected a bigger threat, Kou Kiet had been crafted as a limited spoiling effort with modest objectives. Now, nearly one month into the operation and with PAVN offering almost no response, on 1 September Vang Pao thoroughly revamped the goals of Kou Kiet to include the capture of Moung Soui, Phou Khe, the hills around Khang Khay, and the high ground southwest of Nong Pet.

With these new objectives, GM 22 advanced northward in force. Within five days, half the plain was in RLG hands. Taken by surprise, PAVN left behind droves of equipment. At Phongsavan the Hmong stumbled across a line of PT-76 amphibious tanks, and the town's airstrip held thousands of mortar shells. Continuing northeast along Route 7, the regiment moved onto the hills south of Khang Khay. Detecting no opposition, the Hmong on 9 September descended into the town. The Chinese Economic and Cultural Mission, they found, had been abandoned in August. Also abandoned was the town's POW camp; its 100 FAR/Neutralist internees had earlier been marched east to Nong Het and forced to build a new prison.

At the same time that Khang Khay was liberated, GM 23 was swinging into action south of the PDJ. On 12 September, the regiment retook both Phou Khe and Xieng Khouangville. Elements also headed north to occupy Khang Khay, thus enabling GM 22 on 18 September to move one kilometre northwest to Phou Sani. Hidden in that mountain's limestone face, the Hmong uncovered a major cave complex holding a Pathet Lao radio station, a depot containing 15 million in Pathet Lao paper money, and an emergency headquarters for the Chinese cultural mission.

Hungry for more real estate, Vang Pao sanctioned a mixed FAR-SGU task force to take the mountains dotting the central western sector of the plain. By 18 September, a FAR battalion secured the foothills south of Phou Keng, while irregulars seized Phou San to the east. The following day, however, PAVN opposition – for the first time in the campaign – began to stiffen, frustrating the government's advance over the next 48 hours. To reinforce the sector, Vang Pao called on GM 21, which had been resting since Off Balance, to seize Phou Keng by night. This was accomplished on 24 September, allowing government troops to look out over the northern and northwestern plain.

While FAR and irregular troops cemented their grip over the PDJ, a separate task force composed of seven ADC companies moved against Moung Soui. By the last week of September, the militia closed on its target, allowing two companies to move unopposed into the Moung Soui valley on the final day of the month. A handful of trapped Vietnamese, malnourished and in tatters, withdrew toward Ban Khay before disappearing into the jungle.

By the last day of September, Kou Kiet had realised all of its territorial objectives. In addition, airpower had destroyed or damaged 308 communist vehicles on the plain. Moreover, Kou Kiet had resulted in the liberation of some 20,000 civilians, many of whom had been earlier exploited as communist porters. Against all odds, Vang Pao's gambit had succeeded beyond the expectations of his CIA advisors.

Retaining those gains would be another story.

SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

This book is based heavily on interviews conducted during the 1986-1995 timeframe as part of the research for *Shadow War* (Paladin Press, 1995) co-authored with the late James Morrison. Relevant documents were obtained from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Joint Publication Research Service, and the Declassified Documents Reference System.

Chapter One

The following persons were interviewed for the timeframe covered in this chapter (in alphabetical order): William Andresevic, Bill Chance, Tom Fosmire, Joe Hazen, William Lair, Lloyd "Pat" Landry, Kong Le, Robert Mountel, Manit Nakajitti, Vang Pao, Chamnien Pongpyrot, Anthony Poshepny, Pranet Ritileuchai, Jack Shirley, Soutchay Vongsavanh, and William Young.

Chapter Two.

The following persons were interviewed for the timeframe covered in this chapter (in alphabetical order): Terry Burke, Jack Cahill, Ed Dearborn, Gary Erb, Tom Hewitt, Richard Holm, William Lair, Vint Lawrence, Kong Le, Mike Lynch, Jack Mathews, Manit Nakajitti, Sanit Nakajitti, Thongchai Nipitsukakan, Gene Norwinski, Vang Pao, Anthony Poshepny, Jack Shirley, and Veera Star.

Chapter Three

The following persons were interviewed for the timeframe covered in this chapter (in alphabetical order): Jim Dunn, Gary Erb, Mike Lynch, Jane Randall, Vernchian Saechao, James Sheldon, and Don Stephens.

Chapter Four

The following persons were interviewed for the timeframe covered in this chapter (in alphabetical order): Chuck Campbell, Walt Floyd, Tom Fosmire, James Glerum, Ernie Kuhn, Robert Kustra, George Morton, James Stanford, and Doug Swanson.

Chapter Five

The following persons were interviewed for the timeframe covered in this chapter (in alphabetical order): Chuck Campbell, James Dunn, Cynthia S. Finn, Al Friend, Jim Glerum, Brad Handley, Richard Kustra, Tom Lum, Ted Moore, Steve Murchison, Merle Pribbenow, Harry Pugh, Terry Quill, Ousa Sananikone, Soui Sananikone, James Sheldon, Robert Shires, John Spence, Don Stephens, Dhonnadit Sudhides, MacAlan Thompson, Soutchay Vongsavanh, and Xay Dang Xiong.

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